

*Mirage of Blaze volume 6: The Supreme
Conqueror's Demon Mirror*

Kuwabara Mizuna

Prologue

"My lord, it is I: Kousaka Masanobu. I have returned."

The clear resonant voice cut through the chorus of insects from the garden to the motionless man looking up at the night sky at its edge.

He replied, "Mmn... I thank thee for thy labors."

On one knee behind his lord, Kousaka looked up to see his master's gaze upon the plants swaying in the cool wind.

"How fare the provinces around the capital?"

"My lord. The rumors of Akechi's alliance with the [Ikkou Sect](#) are true. The rogue has roused the commanders there and intends to drive the anti-Nobunaga coalition into headlong confrontation with Oda.... [Matsunaga Hisahide](#) , [Araki Murashige](#) , and others have already joined him. He has contacted [Eizan Enryaku Temple](#) as well."

"Is't so." The broad shoulders turned slowly to reveal a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties with a long, angular face. His deep black eyes, though cool at first glance, glittered with pride and hints of the indomitable will concealed in their innermost depths. His thick lips tightened abruptly.

"Accursed Oda. Those he wronged in his past life return now to demand retribution. I blame them not for't. 'Twill be harder now for Oda to suppress the provinces around the capital."

"The stubborn resistance of the **onshou** in the area has held Oda back up to this point, but he can no longer

afford to overlook them now that they have banded together." Kousaka paused, then added, "Oda has stopped his drive east to begin gathering his troops to exterminate the anti-Oda forces. My lord—"

"Hmn."

The man stepped back into the room and took his seat its head.

"The provinces around the capital will become another of Oda's bases.

He will not allow the forces arrayed against him to strengthen further.

'Tis well. If Oda is stretched, the unification of the **Kantou** will become tha much easier. That is the reason for which I called thee here, Kousaka."

"My lord!"

"The Houjou have begun to move."

Kousaka looked up abruptly.

"Thou hast heard of the theft of the '**Tsutsuga Mirror** ' from **Toushou Shrine** ?"

"Yes. It was two months or so ago, if memory serves. But is **Obu** -dono not searching for it with the <<**nue** >> of **Shimotsuke** ?"

"**Obu** was killed three days ago."

"What...!"

Kousaka involuntarily half-raised himself to ask, "Killed...by whom?!"

"According to the <<nue >> who escaped, the assassin was a servant of the Houjou. I sent Obu in an attempt to retrieve the 'Tsusuga Mirror'. Though they were not certain, they sensed what might be onshou activity in Nikkou . If the Houjou do indeed hold the 'Tsusuga Mirror'—if the Houjou should have the use of such a tool, then even kanshou could not stand against it. If the mirror is not sealed, 'twould mean our doom."

Kousaka's expression was also extremely grim.

"... My lord."

"Danjou. I charge thee with the task of recovering the Tsutsuga Mirror . If thou canst not do so, use any means at thy disposal to destroy it."

The man gazed at him with eyes that scorched the air.

"To unify the Kantou ,

we must destroy those troublesome Houjou. They must die ere they become

the great evil standing in the way of our unification of the country."

Kousaka's expression as he looked at his master Takeda Shingen was much more serious than usual. Shingen stared into the distance, his eyes burning with the ambition he had not been able to achieve four hundred years ago.

"Ere long we shall set forth to subjugate the Houjou."

Shingen's gaze fixed again on Kousaka.

"One day thou wilt lead the army that will conquer the southern Kantou . But first the Tsusuga Mirror ""must"" be found and destroyed."

"Yes, my lord."

"I cannot guess at the schemes of the Houjou. Be on thy guard, but make all haste. The fate of our clan hangs in the balance. Dost thou understand me?" Shingen asked sternly.

Kousaka prostrated himself and answered, "I do, my lord."

"Let me be clear: we will subjugate both the Houjou and the Date in the Northeast. Once we have finished punishing the Ashina of the Aizu, we will prepare a pincer attack on the Houjou. And—" Shingen cut himself off, then spoke more forcefully, "—of the one who was my earlier vessel."

"..."

Kousaka was silent, but his eyes flashed. Shingen asked cautiously, "Thou art certain of what thou glimpsed of his true form?"

"With all respect, my lord. If it were not so, I cannot think that Saburou Kagetora would have been at his side. Faced with a being with power equal to

Kenshin, the only one capable of sealing that enormous power—the only one able to stand in Kenshin's place would be Saburou-dono."

Shingen pondered Kousaka's reply for a moment, then smoothly stood and walked past him back to the edge of the garden.

"Thou wouldst say Saburou is the only one who might control him?"

"As Kenshin's proxy..."

"...One day we shall have to deal with him. To leave him to Saburou is akin to entrusting him with a bomb of infinite destructive capacity. He is more a danger than the [Tsutsuga Mirror](#) . 'Twould be best to destroy him ere he falls into Oda's hands."

"What is your will, my lord?"

Shingen turned, his decision made.

"In any case, the extermination of the Houjou comes before all. I entrust the [Tsutsuga Mirror](#) to thee."

"I am at your command. But if I threaten the Houjou," Kousaka's brows creased, "Saburou-dono wouldst, belike, come to their aid."

"...Because they are his true father and brothers?"

Shingen thought for a moment, his eyes lowered slightly.

"Indeed, I do not think he would attack his own kin.

Saburou...Kagetora..." he said the name contemplatively, looking out at the garden. Insects chirped.

"Though 'twere for but a short time, he was adopted into our clan. Still, I never called him my son..."

"My lord."

"Hath he lived all through these four hundred years...?"

Shingen sighed, then smiled slightly.

"Kenshin too hath forced cruel things upon him..."

Bell crickets chirped nearby. Nothing of summer remained in the night wind
The end of August was near.

Lord and vassal fell silent, listening to the sounds of the garden.

Chapter 1: The Princess at the Water's Bottom

"Yuiko-hyaan!" Morino Saori shrieked upon spotting Yuiko outside the ticket-examination booths at [Shinjuku Station](#) 's south entrance, and Takeda Yuiko, who had come to meet her, smiled widely at the unforgettable piercing voice.

"Saori-chaaaaan!"

They rushed up to each other and skipped around excitedly, holding hands and chattering happily:

"Eeeeeeeek! Yuiko-hyan, Yuiko-hyan! It's been soooo long since I saw you!"

"Saori-chan, you grew out your hair! It's so cuuute!"

"Yuiko-hyan, I love your ponytail too! Eeeeeeeek, I can't believe it's been so long! How have you been?"

"I've been great like usual!"

Three days before the end of summer, Saori had finally managed to save enough from her part-time job to visit Yuiko in Tokyo. It had taken her the entire summer to earn enough for the trip plus shopping, but she had made it just in time.

And speaking of that part-time job, Saori had been helping out at the Dentist Office run by Narita Yuzuru's family. Nothing could have made her happier.

"Saori-chan, nice work on getting the perfect summer job, you schemer

you!" Yuiko teased.

Saori responded with a regal smile, "But I got a *personal* invitation from Narita-kun!" Her face broke out into the grin she had been wearing all summer. "How could I refuse?"

A student from [Shinshuu University](#) had worked at Narita Dentist Office during the first part of summer,

but he had gone home for the month of August, creating a sudden vacancy. Hearing of the problem, Yuzuru had remembered that Saori was looking for a summer job.

He hadn't needed to ask twice.

"And you wouldn't believe how great Narita-kun's father is. He's really nice and smart too—he's the model dentist! Narita-kun is so like his father! Oh, but his mother is really refined, too! I'm pretty sure we'd all get along just fine if they were my in-laws!"

"What? Saori-chan, are you already..."

Saori looked blank for a moment before clapping Yuiko's shoulder and saying even more loudly, "No, no! You're thinking too much! Me, Narita-kun's wife? Narita-kun's wife! Eeek!"

She blushed so hard that an ice cream cone would have melted from the heat radiating from her face.

"All right! I'm going to treat you to lunch today with money from the Naritas!"

"Really? Yay!"

Their high-spirited chatter turned a few heads from the South Entrance crowd as they set off at a brisk pace for Mylord.

Though it was almost the end of August, the progression of sweltering-hot days in Tokyo continued unabated. The abundant rainfall during the first part of the year meant that there was no worry of water shortages, but the temperature here reached the thirties every day. Though it had also been relatively hot in [Matsumoto](#) this year, temperatures there were nowhere near Tokyo's. Nevertheless, Saori was so happy at seeing Yuiko again that even the scorching heat couldn't deter her from dancing exuberantly around her friend.

The two friends had lunch at a restaurant in the Shinjuku Mylord shopping complex.

"Huum... Sounds like a lot has happened..."

Yuiko and Saori were engaged in a lively exchange of the latest news over a mushroom and shellfish dish at a Russian restaurant Yuiko had recommended. Saori was telling Yuiko about the Kasuke showing up after [Takeda Shingen](#), followed by Chiaki's kidnapping (?) of Narita Yuzuru.

"Yeeeah." She sighed. "Geez, I can't take it anymore!"

"Why?"

"Ougi-kun and those guys, they keep leaving me out of things!"

Yuiko's eyes widened. Saori sulked, "Because I keep ending up the odd person out while they're off on all those scary and interesting ghost-hunts and stuff. Don't you think that's just totally unfair?"

"Mmm—...nn."

Takaya would probably have popped a vein if he'd heard her say that.

"Sure, I never thought that Ougi-kun would be able to do something that cool, but he's totally monopolizing everybody—Narita-kun and Chiaki-kun *and* Naoe-san."

Yuiko asked timidly, "Saori-chan, are you jealous?"

"Wha...? Well, yeah, of course I am!"

Yuiko blinked, then leaned forward slightly after a moment of thought.

"But Saori-chan, I think it's best to leave all of that stuff alone, really."

"Why?"

"I can sense spirits, so I've always been scared of them. When I was possessed, I truly thought I might die. If you keep playing around like this and not take it seriously, you'll get badly hurt one of these days. So I think it's better to leave all of it alone..."

Yuiko's tone was unwontedly serious, and Saori tensed as she bit into a mushroom. She had virtually no sensitivity to spirits, but she could hear the truth of experience in Yuiko's voice.

"... So how have you been, Yuiko-hyan? Have you run into any more weird stuff?"

"No," Yuiko replied, setting down her spoon. "But I can still vaguely remember the things that happened."

Yuiko was referring to the time she had been possessed by [Sanjou-no-Kata](#) , [Takeda Shingen](#) 's principle wife. Sanjou had temporarily taken complete control of

Yuiko's body, but Yuiko could still hazily recall the things Sanjou had seen and done and even what she had been thinking.

"How can I explain this? ...It's not so bad anymore, but it's like the princess' memories stayed with me even afterwards, and it hurt a lot."

"You were really scary, Yuiko-hyan. You told me that you'd make me your handmaiden."

"Yeah. ...I guess I was. But, how do I put this...? She was...happy." A faraway look came into Yuiko's eyes as she reached for Sanjou's fading memories.

"She was so happy that she could meet her lord again. ...I think she must have really loved him," Yuiko smiled. "It is kind of marvelous, isn't it? Being able to see the lover separated from you by death four hundred years later? It's a really really wonderful thing. I can understand how she felt."

"I know, I know!" Saori, looking moved to tears, nodded vigorously. "I think I would definitely feel the same way. She must have wanted to be

with him even after reincarnation."

"Yeah. But I wonder what happens to people after they're reincarnated?"

Yuiko pondered the question, looking quite serious. "The person you love, your family, your friends—what happens in your next life? Do you come together again? Or are you all separated? But no one can guarantee

that you'll be able to find each other again...if I'll be reborn apart from everyone and never be able to meet them for all my life, then I don't want to die either."

"Yeeah," Saori nodded pensively. "I wonder who decides? I guess it must be God?"

"Maybe... I wonder. Oh, oh, by the way! That concert you mentioned!"

"Ah, what? Oh, they were really really good! It was the best concert ever! They're coming to Tokyo next, right?"

So the conversation turned, and they chatted for close to two more hours.

They ended up doing a shopping crawl of [Shibuya](#) and [Harajuku](#) that afternoon, and it was close to eight by the time they got back to

Yuiko's house hauling large shopping bags. On the next day they would be going to an amusement park with pools and water slides, a trip they had been planning for some time, and they gleefully made paper charms for good weather like elementary school children on the day before a field trip. They finally went to bed after one in the morning.

The weather the next morning, as if amused by all their worry, was wonderful—perfect pool weather, in fact.

"Yuiko-hyaaaan! Hurry!" The swimsuit-clad Saori, who seemed unable to wait another second to jump into the pool, shouted at Yuiko with a floatation ring in one hand. Yuiko chased breathlessly after Saori as she charged full throttle ahead, completely ignoring the regulations forbidding running by the poolside.

"Sa-Saori-chan, you're so full of energy..."

"Yes I am! Come on, let's get in before anybody else shows up! Hydropolis here we come!"

Saori had dashed into the park the moment it opened and headed straight for her target: the water slide which was the main attraction of the pool, called the 'Hydropolis'. Coming to this pool, the star summertime draw of an [amusement park](#) in the [Nerima District](#) known for its odd and eccentric advertising, was Saori's current heart's desire. It boasted thirty types of water slides, and was awash with people every day of the summer. She was hoping that it would be a little less crowded now that summer vacation was almost over, but the succession of sweltering days seemed to have drawn the crowds out in force today as well.

"I even bought a brand-new swimsuit just for today! Oh, but what happens if a handsome boy says 'what a cute girl' and 'let's go have

some tea'? What would I do then—?!"

"Hello? Saori-chan? Earth to Saori-chan...?"

"But but I've already given my heart to Narita-kun. Oh, but having a summer romance once in a while would be all right, wouldn't it?"

Unsurprisingly, even Yuiko's smile had become a bit fixed.

Still, in the end Yuiko found herself dragged into the irrepressible Saori's goal of 'total conquest of the Hydropolis,' and afternoon had arrived before she even noticed.

"Saori-chan!"

Saori was still running around without even a pause for breath, but she turned when Yuiko called her name. Yuiko, panting for breath, looked tiredly at her.

"What?"

"We—we probably don't want to overdo it on the water slides. People say that it can wear holes in your swimsuit."

"Whaaat? Really?"

"Yeah..." Yuiko responded, collapsing in place.

"Yuiko-chan! Are you okay?"

"Yes..."

Saori dashed up to her. Yuiko drew up her legs and took deep breaths. She felt slightly dizzy. The cause wasn't tiredness, but a sort of physical malaise, a feeling of strangeness. Saori peered at her face. It was slightly pale.

"Are you feeling unwell? I—I'm really sorry. I wasn't paying attention..."

"No, I'm all right. I think I'll feel better if I can rest for a bit..."

Saori hurriedly looked around.

"Let me go get you a towel. Oh, maybe it's because you're hungry? Wait here, I'll be right back with a towel," Saori said, and was quickly swallowed up by the crowds of people.

Yuiko took another deep breath as she gazed after Saori. The pool in front of her was filled to bursting with people. Families, junior and senior high students with their friends or boyfriends or girlfriends—rather than swimming in water, it seemed like they were swimming in people.

The sun was scorching hot against her skin.

(I wonder if it's the crowds that are making me feel ill?)

Yuiko looked weakly up at the sky. Her body felt heavy and sluggish. The sun beat down on her. Her head spun.

(I...don't think it's heatstroke...)

At that moment—

A cold shiver suddenly ran down her back, a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. Yuiko instinctively hunched lower, hugging herself.

(It's cold...)

It was as if her body temperature had suddenly plummeted. The cold had enveloped her body in the blink of an eye, and she felt like she had turned to ice down to her fingertips.

(What...)

Something was not right. She could immediately guess what this chill meant. She had experienced this sort of physical abnormality before—many times, in fact. This was—

Yuiko's head jerked up.

There, in the pool, in the moment someone broke the surface: the fleeting reflection of a gigantic human head.

(What...!)

Then, at almost the same instant, sudden pandemonium and a chorus of screams.

"!"

Yuiko turned reflexively. The clamor was coming from the wave pool.

Someone appeared to be drowning. The lifeguard leapt in. Another scream

came from the opposite side: a girl's cry. It was followed by violently splashing water.

(Someone's drowning...?)

Forgetting her chill, Yuiko dashed over. A young girl bobbed up and down in the water, screaming for help. The lifeguard had rushed to her immediately, but she continued to struggle wildly, half-crazed with fear.

(What's going on...!)

"Yuiko-hyan!"

Saori reappeared from the crowd. She, too, stared petrified at the dramatic rescue scene, the towel forgotten in her hand. The girl was finally lifted out of the pool, but she had swallowed so much water by that point that she had lost consciousness. The lifeguards immediately began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Saori and Yuiko looked on from a large group of curious bystanders. The person from the other pool had also been rescued. Two crowds had formed, and those still remaining in the pools had also stopped to watch.

(What just happened...?)

Yuiko looked at the pool, face pale.

(A person's...face...?)

Could it have been...? But she was certain she had seen it. A horribly

unnatural human face reflected from the surface of the water. A face so large...that it could not have belonged to an actual person...

The crowd stirred. The girl had come around.

"Are you all right?" The lifeguard asked.

The girl, her face strained with terror, replied, "So-someone...someone was pulling on my leg! Someone was dragging me down into the water! They were holding my leg!"

"Pulling on your leg? But—"

"That's what happened! Someone suddenly pulled on my leg really hard!" the girl yelled agitatedly, but the lifeguard only regarded her dubiously. Even if someone had been pulling on her leg, the pool wasn't very deep. No matter how startled she might have been by someone pulling her down, to actually drown in such shallow water was peculiar.

"Someone just kept pulling me down! Someone kept pulling on my leg...!"

The crowd muttered. Yuiko's face stiffened.

(Could it be...)

Another shiver suddenly ran through her, followed by a sharp buzzing that pierced her ears without warning. It was unbearable. Yuiko pressed against her ears.

"Ow..."

"Yu-Yuiko-hyan!"

Just then there was another scream from the pool. She looked up, startled. Another woman was disappearing beneath the water.

"Oh no!"

"I'm fine! Help her!"

Lifeguards flew to the rescue from all directions. Frozen in place, Yuiko stared at the woman flailing violently in agony.

(What is—!)

Yuiko couldn't quite believe her eyes. She could see the suggestion of a hand pulling on the woman's leg—a white, bizarrely long hand. No, but—or some reason... That hand—!

(It's not attached to anything!)

As soon as she realized it, Yuiko could suddenly hear a countless number of voices speaking into her ear. Those voices did not belong to the park visitors. They were too different. They pressed around her, surrounding her.

(No... What?)

Dull, muttering, groaning voices that seemed to crawl along the ground. The air around her quickly chilled. Those repulsive voices swirled around Yuiko's head, and she instinctively shut her eyes hard.

(What's happening...?!)

"Kyaaaah—!"

A human scream from the poolside abruptly obscured the eerie voices.

It had come from the girl who had just been rescued. Yuiko and Saori jumped and looked over at her.

Both of them gulped.

The girl shaking in terror...

—had countless strands of unnaturally long black hair coiled around her foot.

The start signals for the roller coasters and the screams of the park visitors pierced into Yuiko's head. Staring at them dazedly, she waved at Saori, who had returned at a dead run.

Yuiko was able to regain some of her balance at the picnic tables set in the shade of some trees. She took the juice Saori had bought for her.

"How are you feeling? A little better?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now..." Yuiko answered, her color slightly better.

After the spectacle, Yuiko, feeling ill, had hurriedly changed and left the pool area. Putting some distance between herself and that spot had

restored a little of her energy, but in place of the chills she now had the beginnings of a headache.

The three people rescued from the pool had not sustained any lasting harm, but... All three had given the same explanation: someone had been pulling on their legs.

Saori pulled the straw out of her mouth and leaned forward. "I heard people talking about it earlier—" She had overheard the park's fast food restaurant personnel discussing the incidents. "I wonder what's going on with that pool? I guess there's been a bunch of accidents like that happening here in the past few days."

"People being pulled into the water by their legs?"

"Yeah. And—" Saori frowned, "all of them were young women. They're saying it's somebody playing a prank, but nobody's seen the culprit..."

Yuiko's expression became grave. Saori looked over her shoulder towards the pool.

"You saw those long hairs wrapped around that girl's foot, right? I heard that it was the same for the other people. People are saying that a ghost is doing it."

"A ghost..."

"Yeah. Speaking of which, you said that you saw a person's face on the surface of the water, too, right?"

"Yes," Yuiko nodded, her lips tightening. "I think...it was a woman..."

"A woman...?"

"Yes. It was bad back there. It frightened me. I heard moaning, a lot of people moaning..."

Saori's face suddenly stiffened.

"Moaning?"

"Yes. It's turned into a scary place. It wasn't like this the last time I came here. Is this what people call spirit-sensitivity? I don't like it at all. It's...listen..." Yuiko looked back at the pool. "There they are again. Those voices."

"What?"

Saori jerked up. Yuiko's expression had reminded her for a moment of the time when she had been possessed by [Sanjou-no-Kata](#). Yuiko's gaze was trained in the direction of the pool as if it fascinated her.

"Ah... There it is again."

"..."

Saori stared silently at Yuiko. Yuiko sat frozen as a statue, her ears straining towards the sound. Words cracked her stone lips.

"Cold..."

"What?"

Yuiko, face blank, mumbled awkwardly, "The water...so cold...everyone...all

together..."

"Yu-Yuiko-hyan!"

Saori stood and tugged at Yuiko's arm with all her might. Yuiko came back to herself.

"Saori-chan?"

"Let's go home! Yuiko-hyan, something bad's going to happen if we stay here! So let's just go home now, okay?"

"What was I just...?"

"Yuiko-hyan, we can't stay here! Let's go home! Come on, let's go already! Come on, let's go, come on!"

"Sa-Saori-chan!"

Saori frantically pulled Yuiko after her out the exit.

(...!)

Yuiko turned at the sensation of something leaning on her shoulder. Someone was calling from the pool.

(Who are you...?) she asked in return. It felt as if someone were telling her not to go...

"Yuiko-hyan?"

Yuiko stood still, looking back at the pool. Cool air swelled from her feet.

It could only be a person's malevolent thoughts.

A person's...? No, not a person—

Not a living person, at least. A person who had lived a long time ago, to be precise.

<<The water...so cold...>>

Her body froze in place the moment she heard the voice.

<<Everyone...all together...>>

Even someone without any spirit-sensitivity at all would have recognized the brimming malice behind the thoughts that suddenly thrust into Yuiko's mind in the moment of contact. The voice belonged to a woman. Though indistinct, the hatred in it slammed into Yuiko.

<<Into the bottom of the cold water...>>

Yuiko could see the girl within her mind.

<<Everyone will go, all together...>>

"St-stop it!"

"Yuiko-hyan!"

Still paralyzed, Yuiko cried out, "We can't! Saori-chan, what should we do? Worse things are going to happen if we just leave like this!"

"W-worse things...?"

"The girl-spirit said she wants to take everyone with her. To pull them

to the water's bottom. What should we do? If this goes on, someone might really die. What should we do what should we do?"

Yuiko flung herself on Saori, who immediately started panicking as well.

"You're asking me? What should we do? What should we do?"

"We can't leave things as they are! What if someone actually dies? What should we do? I don't want anyone to die! What should we do what should we do?"

"Uuuuuuugh..." Saori moaned, thinking desperately, when finally—

"I got it."

She clenched her fists hard.

"I've made my decision. It's our only choice."

"Our only choice? What is?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Saori said very seriously. "<<Choubuku >>."

Chapter 2: Blood-stained Castle

"So that's why we got called out here?" Chiaki Shuuhei asked Saori. She nodded vigorously.

"Yeah! ...Well, actually I was thinking that I should do that <<choubuku >> thing, but then I remembered that I have like zero sensitivity to spirits— So why are you here again, Chiaki-kun?" she asked, and Chiaki's shoulders sagged abruptly.

They were gathered the next day at [Toshimayuen Station](#) .

After the events of the day before, Saori had seized upon this golden opportunity to call Yuzuru for a "consult" and through him (this was the important bit) ask Takaya and the others to make a trip to Tokyo. Yuzuru had agreed to Saori's request, though not without grumbling: "But just so you know, he's been pretty wild lately..."

"Huh?" Saori had asked. But seeing Takaya now, she could understand what Yuzuru had meant by "wild."

(Okay, so he is pretty scary...)

She'd sensed it as soon as she had caught sight of him at the station's ticket examination booths. By "wild," Yuzuru hadn't been referring to Takaya's clothes, but something in the way he acted, the way he carried himself. She had often heard people say that there was something about the look in his eyes that put them off, but she had never seen them

this cold. Even when they alighted on her they spared her only a scornful glance before moving away. He said nothing, and Saori, who had been about to greet him with her usual cheer, felt her voice freeze in her throat. In the end, eyeing his expression, she only managed a timid "hey."

(I guess it was a bad time to have called him out here...)

"Sorry for the delay, Morino-san," Yuzuru interceded.

Saori immediately latched onto him, asking in a small voice,

"Narita-kun! Wh-what's happened to Ougi-kun? He's really scaring me...'

"Yeah..." Yuzuru replied worriedly. "He's been like that for the past few days."

"That idiot's been off by himself digging his own grave," Chiaki Shuuhei cut into the conversation.

Just the state Takaya was in was enough to worry Yuzuru, so he had also contacted Chiaki and asked him to come with them.

"And of course he won't say anything. I can't deal with the guy!"

"He's a handful, that's for sure. Just what is it he's brooding about, anyway?"

Ayako had come along as well. After receiving Chiaki's call, she had immediately left her place in [Yokohama](#) to join them here in [Shinjuku](#) .

Yuzuru and the others had no inkling of the reason behind Takaya's black mood. Takaya wasn't talking about it. But according to his

younger sister Miya, these past ten days or so he had been roaming about town, and many nights he didn't come home at all or returned bloody and bruised from drunken brawls. He barely said a word to anyone and seemed constantly lost in thought, yet exploded at the smallest things and indiscriminately vented his anger on furniture and things around the house.

What in the world happened? Ask him, Yuzuru-san. Miya, almost in tears, had pleaded. But Yuzuru knew from experience that once Takaya

got to this point, it was nigh impossible to get him to open up.

By disposition, he tended to hold those things that bothered him close to his chest. He would, when asked, only put on an artificial smile and respond "it's nothing." That silence was not a lack of trust, but simply a wish to avoid imposing his problems on others. And it was only towards Miya and Yuzuru that he could make that gentle reply...

Yuzuru could not ask about whatever was troubling Takaya as long as Takaya didn't bring it up himself. There was nothing he could do other than wait him out.

So though it was rather frustrating...

But right now, Takaya was not even capable of that "it's nothing" fake smile. When Yuzuru spoke to him, Takaya would only look back at him without saying a word, a hint of anguish in his expression. ...Things must be pretty bad.

He could conjecture somewhat. It must have been a few days after he'd heard that Takaya had gone to [Toyama](#) with Naoe... Takaya had suddenly come to Yuzuru's house late one night,

soaked straight through and chilled as if he had walked from the train station through the rain. When he'd asked, Takaya had replied that he had just returned from [Toyama](#) .

After that was when he started behaving strangely. In response to his question about Naoe being with him, Takaya had looked back at Yuzuru with pain on his face and said that he'd returned alone. It was as if he had wanted to talk to Yuzuru, but couldn't get the words out.

Something had happened in those few days he'd been in [Toyama](#) .

Yuzuru was certain of that much. But...

"Ougi-kun..." Yuiko greeted Takaya. She was apparently under the impression that his sullenness was caused by being called on such short notice to Tokyo by herself and Saori.

"I'm so sorry we had to impose on you so suddenly. I always seem to end up being such a bother to you..."

"..."

Takaya looked down at Yuiko. His gaze, so cold and distant until that moment, suddenly softened.

"Just think of what happened in [Matsumoto](#) as horrible bad luck. Nothing strange has happened to you since then, right?"

Yuzuru's eyes widened—and he wasn't the only one startled by the sudden

shift. Chiaki and Ayako turned in surprise towards Takaya. Yuiko, too, seemed aware of the changes in Takaya since she had met him around four months ago.

"Ye-yes. I've been fine..."

"I see."

He nodded with a calmness that seemed to belong to another person.

(This isn't Takaya...)

There had been times in these recent days when that thought had suddenly struck him, and he had felt, as now, something slightly alien about Takaya. His expression, these manners that surfaced in Takaya from time to time which imbued him with a kind of gravity, of dignity.

Within this Takaya was a calmness and self-assurance backed by some unnamed certainty. Chiaki and Ayako seemed to have noticed this transformation as well. Or—no, perhaps they, who had known the Kagetora

that was, only saw him becoming more and more himself instead of this gap between him and 'Takaya' that Yuzuru couldn't help but feel.

(What is going on with you...?)

Something clearly different from his lovable awkwardness, his unaffected warmth of heart was taking seed within Takaya.

Each glimpse he caught of it gave Yuzuru the horribly uneasy feeling

that in the next moment Takaya would disappear out of his reach.

(What's happened to you, Takaya...) he asked silently, while the one to whom he directed the question looked down quietly, the misery back in his countenance.

"All right then. Come on, we can't stand around here all day. Let's go, let's go!" Saori called loudly in an attempt to lighten the mood, and led the group out of the station. Even Saori, who usually charged blithely into the fray with nary a care in the world, seemed to feel out of her element today.

Next to her, Ayako added in a deliberately bright tone, "That's right!

We have to go get changed! It's been ages since I've been in a pool!"

"Come on Narita-kun, you too!"

"O...okay..."

He turned to see Takaya following them, but...

Though the sky was bright and clear, none of them could feel any of that cheer reflected inside.

It was another fine day. Since today was the last day of summer vacation, the pool was a popular destination. After changing, the band gathered at the poolside.

"So this is the one, huh...?" Chiaki muttered to himself as he surveyed the scene. He sensed no malice, perhaps because the mixed "energy" of the mass of people was masking any spiritual aura.

"Wonder what it is? Spirit of a drowning victim, maybe?"

"We can't ask if it doesn't show itself," Chiaki grumbled. Beside him, Yuzuru looked at Takaya.

"How about you? Can you feel anything? Any sort of evil aura?"

"Yeah... There's something here, but it's really faint..."

"Sorry about the wait." The female contingent joined them.

Chiaki asked Yuiko, "It was the spirit of a woman, right? The thing that tried to drag you in."

Yuiko nodded. "I couldn't see anything but her arm in the water, but I think it belonged to the same person whose voice I heard. It was...a woman. But..."

It hadn't been just one person.

"Several voices? It wasn't just that woman's spirit?" Ayako, wearing an eye catching high leg leotard, asked.

Yuiko nodded, adding, "I saw the woman's face. She had really long wet hair. She was wearing a kimono. Something like an [uchikake](#) , I think. Like the kind they wear in historical dramas..."

"Historical dramas...huh?" Yuzuru murmured.

Chiaki stood in thought next to him, face grim.

"What is it? Have you thought of something?"

"No. Well, I'm worried about this place. I'm not sure if I'm remembering correctly, but I think this is..."

"This could get ugly, hmm...?" Ayako muttered as if she had followed his thoughts and reached the same conclusion.

Saori asked, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, didn't you know? A castle stood here once."

"What?" Yuzuru exclaimed.

"A castle? Not from the [Sengoku Era](#) ?"

"Yeah. It was called [Nerima Castle](#) , and it once belonged to the Toshima Clan, which was the clan that ruled

these parts. I'm pretty sure it fell when Toshima lost that battle with

[Oota Doukan](#) , though."

"Wait a minute. So does that mean these spirits are also [onshou](#) from the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>?"

"Probably. This area was within the Houjou sphere of influence, but I heard that several of the local lords refused to be brought under their umbrella, which resulted in some vicious battles. If this was the site of Toshima's castle, then it must be the spirits of the soldiers who died in battle that are now being roused to defend this place to the last. But—" Chiaki added, busily surveying the poolside area, "if

ordinary people are being harmed because of that, then we'll have to remove them before they injure anybody else..."

"Remove them? But if we do that..."

"The living come first, so any spirits causing harm need to be <<exorcised>>. In this case, the <<Yami-Sengoku >> balance of power is secondary. —Let's lure them out, Kagetora. We gotta

make them appear in their true forms before we can do anything."

A complex mix of emotions played across Takaya's face, but he only nodded and replied, "—Yeah..."

He seemed willing and ready to help, and Yuzuru was glad to hear it. He asked, "You okay? It looks like this is going to be kinda hard, so don't overdo it."

"I'm fine. And I think you'd better step back. I've been feeling this weird aura moving around for a while."

Yuzuru looked at Takaya in surprise. He had felt nothing. Takaya's spiritual senses had far surpassed his in these brief months.

"Takaya, you..."

"The spirit we're talking about only targeted women, didn't it?" Takaya turned to Ayako, whose shoulders slumped in resignation.

"All right, all right. Guess I'll play bait," she sighed, then tucked a swim tube under her arm and headed for the river pool.

"Kagetora!" Chiaki shouted, voice strained. His gaze was fixed on the pool.
"Something's moving in there."

"What?!"

A second later, a woman suddenly screamed from the pool to their left. They whirled to see a girl in the water crying for help.

(They got the jump on us...?!)

Something ran across the surface of the water at almost the same time, and several more screams rang out from pools all around them. It ripped through the water surface like a razor: the underwater version of [razor whirlwinds](#) .

(Shit!)

The aquatic [razor whirlwinds](#) slashed through the pools with lightning speed, and screaming people began jumping out of the water.

"Haruie, get all those people out of there! There's something in the water!"

Chiaki was dashing off even before he'd finished speaking. He snatched the microphone out of the hands of a nearby lifeguard.

"Everybody in the water, please get out of the pool! Leave the pool right now!"

Panicking people pushed and shoved to escape until only Ayako remained in the pool. The water razors moved against the current to congregate on Ayako.

"You're not cutting up my Channel swimsuit!"

Ayako formed a <<wall>> of will around herself.

BAM!

The water broke against it with a loud crash and a gigantic splash. The razor whirlwinds summoned by the spirits had collided directly with her <<power>>. Then something pulled on her leg without warning.

"Ah!"

Ayako struggled as it dragged her downward with terrifying strength.

"Haruie!"

Chiaki promptly shot a <<nenpa >> into the water. Ayako could see a white arm pulling on her foot as she struggled and squirmed.

(What the heck is that?!)

CRASH!

A sheet of spray shot high up into the air. Chiaki's <<nenpa >> had smashed into the arm straight-on. Ayako dragged herself out of the pool, coughing violently.

"We're surrounded. Be careful."

"Yeah."

The other guests were running about every which way trying to escape.

Yuiko and Saori were watching the battle huddled together in a corner.

Takaya and the others warily scanned all directions for attack. They could clearly feel the <<malice>> covering the area from not one, but a crowd of spirits.

"!"

Something white suddenly bobbed to the surface. One by one, soaked, blood-covered warriors floated upward. Those who saw them screamed. Takaya, Chiaki, and Ayako concentrated their power to confront the spirits appearing before them.

Exuding hate, the spirits advanced on them, their <<malice>> swelling into bloodlust.

They daren't let this continue.

"Looks like they're pretty worked up."

"So what? They're spirits. We'll deal with 'em all in one blow," Chiaki grinned in anticipation. "Hah, having an audience is getting me all fired up."

The warriors drew their swords, <<malice>> gushing out of them as if they were bloated with it. They roared and attacked with their <<nenpa >>.

"Guh!"

Takaya met them head-on with a <<nenpa >> of his own. White sparks flew, and spray shot up from the surrounding pools. Chiaki and Ayako moved left and right, distributing the warriors' attack.

"Over here, you blockheads!" Chiaki took aim at the warriors appearing

steadily from the water. Some somersaulted back and sank, while the rest attacked with even greater intensity.

"...!"

The water bubbled, throwing up countless drops of water which hung suspended in midair.

"Wh...?"

The water droplets transformed into razor-edged swords and dove at Chiaki. He couldn't dodge them all, and felt one slice into his shoulder. Nor had Ayako escaped unscathed.

"Kyaaaah!"

"Bastards!"

Chiaki angrily formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten.

"Eat this!  (Bai)!"

Takaya had already begun <<exorcising>> the warriors. But he was hard-pressed dealing with their water attack.

"If only we could do something about the water...!"

"Wait! Their leader still hasn't appeared yet!"

"Leader? That woman spirit?"

"Yeah. She's probably the one who's setting them against... !"

Something crashed into the ground in front of her with the explosive force of a bomb going off, sending up a gigantic sheet of spray. The falling water shot towards her like arrows.

"...Bastards...!"

As he formed a <<goshinha >> around himself, Takaya could no longer hold back what he had kept so tightly pressed against his chest for so long.

"You think you can just walk all over us...?! You bastards, that's fucking enough!"

"Yeeeeek! Go Ougi-kun goooooo!"

Saori, whose interpretation of Takaya's reaction seemed somewhat off, cheered him on in a shrill voice. To one side, Yuiko, who was watching the fight fearfully, felt a bolt of ice down her spine. Then—

"Yuiko-san?"

Yuzuru, standing near in an effort to protect them, noticed Yuiko's distress.

"!"

By the time he turned, Yuiko's consciousness had already been supplanted by that of another. Sensing the danger at once, Yuzuru took Saori's arm.

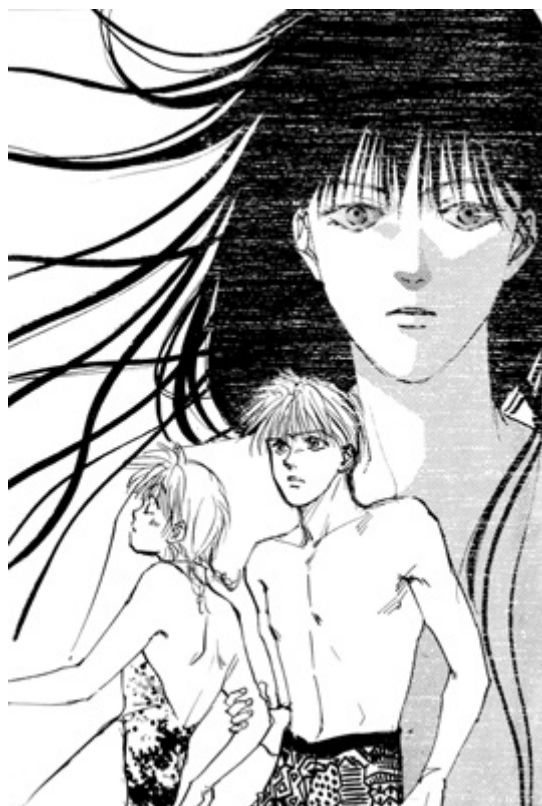
"Na-Narita-kun?"

"No! Step back, Morino-sa...!"

A sudden gust cut off his words. Takaya and the others spun in surprise. Yuiko met them halfway, her long hair wild and tangling.

"Takaya! Yuiko-san's been possessed by something!"

"What?!"



An eerie light burned in Yuiko's eyes. She approached in a staggering, unnatural gait, demanding, "Who are you that dare invade our castle?"

Neither the voice nor the tone belonged to Yuiko. Takaya's face twitched as he thought for an instant that [Sanjou-no-Kata](#) had been revived. One by one, the raging spirits approached Yuiko and

prostrated themselves before her. Takaya studied Yuiko's spiritual aura with deep wariness.

"Who are you?" he demanded, turning to face her directly.

Yuiko replied proudly, "My name is Itsu..."

"Huh...?!" Ayako's head abruptly lifted in recognition. "Itsu...? Princess Itsu of Toshima?"

"You know her?"

"Yeah. She was the daughter of [Toshima Yasuaki](#) , and they say that she threw herself into the [Shakuji River](#) when [Nerima Castle](#) fell... But wasn't a memorial service held here for Princess Itsu? Isn't she supposed to be purified...?"

Ignoring the side conversation between Ayako and Takaya, the spirit within Yuiko who had named herself Itsu asked, her voice hardening, "Who are you? Come you to bring disorder and violence to this castle whilst knowing it to be in the possession of the Toshima?"

"Looks to me like you're the ones causing violence, 'cess. Why're you waking up now, anyway? Why're you meddling?"

"Who are you, knaves? Do you serve Houjou?"

Chiaki and Ayako reacted more strongly to the mention of the Houjou than Takaya. But Takaya's eyes narrowed, and he responded arrogantly, "I've got no idea what the hell you're talking about, but you'd better quiet down right now. If you guys wanna be purified, you'd better stop interfering."

"I trust you not." Princess Itsu's voice came clearly out of Yuiko's lips. "You reek of the Houjou."

"...?"

"This is our castle. It belongs to us and no other. We will never submit to the Houjou! We trust you not. We defended this castle to the death; we will never surrender it again! We will never trust again...!"

"But I'm telling you...!" a frustrated Ayako interrupted. "We're not trying to steal the castle from you! How many times do we have to say it?!"

"Wait, Haruie," Chiaki commanded calmly. "The Houjou have been acting up around here lately. These spirits must've been roused by the Houjou invasion. They're made of pure hatred and suspicion. It's useless to try and persuade them like this."

"Useless?" Princess Itsu's voice was gaining strength and conviction.

"Remember on whose ground you stand. Knaves, know this: we are those who know the meaning of pain. We, who were engulfed in fire, drowned in water cold as ice. What do you know of our hatred? All of us, every one of us. You will taste the pain of those who died here!"

"Get real!" Takaya yelled angrily, looking up. "As if doing that would cleanse your hatred!"

"Argument is useless!"

CRACKLE. A mass of will shot forth from the palm of Yuiko's hand, blasting apart the poolside concrete, but Takaya had already leapt aside. The warriors resumed their attack. A violent <<nenpa >> battle

commenced.

"Haruie! Get everybody else to cover, it's dangerous here!"

"Got it!"

"Nagahide, <<exorcise>> Princess Itsu! Once we take care of their leader the rest will be easy!"

But they found no opening in Princess Itsu's defenses. She appeared to be a spirit of considerable strength, her attacks relentless and fierce.

"Die!"

"Guh!"

Countless razors of water flew at them, cutting into skin when they could not be dodged. Blood flowed from their raised hands as they formed the ritual gesture.

"Ah...!"

Takaya flinched, and Princess Itsu concentrated her attack on him, pressing her advantage. He wove a <<goshinha >> in an attempt to defend himself, but the razor blades tore away at the web of thought and drove towards his body.

"Screw this—!!"

The ground roared. A violent aura flared from Takaya's body in an almost deranged blast of energy. Chiaki spun in surprise.

"Kagetora!"

The pools around them groaned eerily. Fear flashed across Princess Itsu's face. Both Yuzuru and Ayako whirled towards Takaya as they sensed the insane mass of <<power>>.

The expression on Takaya's face was even more terrifying.

"Aaaaah—!"

Cracks ran through the poolside concrete while the ground bulged and shook ominously. The park visitors screamed and ran.

"Kagetora, that's too dangerous! Don't!"

But Takaya was so far consumed by the need to kill that no warning could hold him back. Pieces of smashed concrete shot up into the air, forming large lumps that surrounded Princess Itsu as she watched.

"No, s-stop! Aaaaah!"

"Takaya!"

The chunks shot towards Yuiko. "Shit!" Chiaki spat, protecting Yuiko with a shield. Violent sparks shot off in all directions.

"Get the hell out of my way, Chiaki!"

"You fucking idiot! What the hell are you thinking, you wanna kill that girl?!"

Takaya released a <<nenpa >>

blast of such power that it shoved Chiaki back even while he braced against it with all the strength in his mind and body.

"What the fuck are you doing, you bastard!"

"...!"

"That's enough!"

WHOOOSH. Chiaki released his will. Takaya promptly blocked it with a <<wall>>, but the impact sent him flying into the water.

"Takaya!"

Yuzuru dashed over. Terrified by the duel of <<power>> between Takaya and Chiaki, Princess Itsu sent <<nenpa >> flying wildly in all directions. Ayako stood in her way, forming a wall of will to protect the others. *Crackle crackle!* Sparks flashed as Princess Itsu desperately gathered all her power into her fists—

"You...!"

—and shot it forward!

"You're not getting past me!"

BOOM!

The air between them exploded. Chiaki had countered Princess Itsu's <<nenpa >>

squarely with one of his own. The blast whipped across the water, and Princess Itsu faltered. Chiaki and Ayako jumped on the opportunity. They formed the ritual gesture simultaneously and cried out sharply toward Princess Itsu:

" (Bai)!"

A shiver ran through the princess, and she froze in place. She struggled in surprise, but in vain: she could no longer command her body. The paralyzed Princess Itsu could not even speak.

"Noumakusamanda bodanan Baishiramandaya sowaka !"

The warriors desperately recommenced their attack on the two Yasha-shui, but their attacks disappeared before their very eyes. A <<goshinheki>> encircled them.

"Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten ! For this demon subjugation, lend us thy power!"

Light flared between their fists like twin suns, swelling with power until it could be contained no longer. Princess Itsu attempted one last attack in a desperate effort to escape, but it was already obviously futile.

They pronounced the words of judgment.

"<<Choubuku !>>"

And the fierce light—

Engulfed Princess Itsu's soul in a white explosion.

Chapter 3: Desert Town

The wind brought snatches of laughter from the Flying Pirates ride overhead.

Their fight had ended the ghostly disturbances of the [Toshima Amusement Park](#) pools without incident. Well, perhaps not quite without incident. It had left witnesses dumbfounded, and Yuzuru and the others had hurried out in order to avoid drawing further attention to themselves. However, a portion of the park visitors had apparently mistaken the fight for some kind of show, and cheered Chiaki and Ayako like movie stars.

They all met at the park's picnic area after changing.

"Don't be so down, Yuiko-hyan."

Beneath the shade of the trees, Saori was trying her best to console the despondent Yuiko, who was crushed with self-loathing at the thought of the way she had lost control again and the awful things she had done while possessed. Nothing Saori said seemed to be making much of a difference in Yuiko's mood.

"I understand how you feel," Ayako murmured sympathetically, "it was just..." It certainly wasn't as if Yuiko had wanted to be possessed, and Ayako really didn't blame her, but...

"Cheer up, Yuiko-san," Yuzuru said next to them, unable to just stand by and watch any longer. Having gone through the same experience, he

couldn't help but sympathize.

"We can't change what's already happened. I know how painful it is to have a stranger controlling your body, but all you can do is to try your best from this point forward. So that even if you're possessed again, you won't allow yourself to be controlled."

"But..." Yuiko protested uneasily, casting down her eyes, "I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can ever get used to something like that."

"You can't think about it like that. This is your body. If you truly regret what's happened—if you really don't want it to happen again, then you have to tell yourself that you won't let anybody else take it over," Yuzuru insisted, smiling encouragingly as if willing self-confidence into Yuiko. "Okay?"

Yuiko looked up at Yuzuru, biting her lip, before finally nodding "yes." Relieved, Yuzuru nodded back.

"All right," Ayako said, looking away into the distance, "The problem now is Kagetora..."

"..."

Expression grim, Yuzuru followed Ayako's gaze in the direction Chiaki had taken Takaya.

Chiaki's punch to Takaya's face was hard enough to send him reeling back into a tree. Takaya glared fiercely at Chiaki, a hand pressed

against his cheek.

"You idiot, you think you have time to go around acting like a spoiled brat?!" Chiaki gritted out, struggling to contain his anger. "What the hell were you thinking? Do you have any idea what it means when you lose control? You're not just some punk off the street throwing a few punches!"

"..."

"If you'd kept going, I guarantee you that you would've killed some of those innocent bystanders. Not to mention Yuiko. ...Not that it really matters to me who you kill. It just pisses me off seeing you act like a spoiled kid."

Takaya only glowered back at Chiaki defiantly. Eyes cold, Chiaki demanded, "What happened?"

"..."

"What happened between you and Naoe?"

Takaya's shoulders twitched, and he looked away, flustered. "None of your damn business."

"Something you can't even talk about?"

Takaya glared at Chiaki sharply. Chiaki pressed grimly, relentlessly,

"Is that why there's been no word from him lately? For the same reason you've been flying off the handle for the past couple of days?"

"How the hell would I know?!" Takaya shouted back. "I...a guy like that...how..."

"—'the hell would you know?'" Chiaki snapped in response. "Why don't you tell me then: what *have* you known about him?"

"...!"

His fists clenched in anger. Chiaki only stared back at him motionlessly.

"The very sight of you amazes me."

"Wh..."

"This ignorance of yours, is it just obtuseness through and through? Or is it deliberate? I wonder. If ignorance is a sin, then the sin is yours."

The meaning of his words eluded Takaya. Chiaki studied Takaya appraisingly. "So you are just that thick."

"...I..."

"I thought it might end up like this. I mean, the way he parted with Kagetora thirty years ago. And the fact that Naoe could be so calm when he was finally reunited with you? That in itself was strange. And you, memoryless and ignorant to boot... Damn it, I guarantee you were the one who stirred him up, Kagetora. But I'm pretty sure it was just a matter of time, too. So what do you think of that?"

Chiaki gave the pale, silent Takaya a sidelong glance and snorted lightly. "Humph. You can't believe it? You wanna say that it's insane?"

Well, it probably is insane."

"I don't know! How the hell would I...!"

"You do know. You just don't wanna admit it."

Takaya stopped breathing. He looked at Chiaki: Chiaki, who took nothing seriously, was looking back at him with complete seriousness. He had driven Takaya back against the tree step by step.

"Your ignorance is nothing but evasion. That or self-protection. You *know*, but you lie to yourself and tell yourself that you don't."

"... Chiaki."

"The sin is yours, Kagetora."

Takaya's eyes widened abruptly.

"You ran like this thirty years ago, too. You kept evading and avoiding what was inconvenient for you. ...That's how you drove him mad. Isn't it?"

"—|..."

"You're the hypocrite, Kagetora. You put on this mask, pretend that you're the only one of us who's still sane. You act like you can still be an "honest, upright human being" after living for four hundred years. But we've all turned into demons already. Isn't that right? Being alive for four centuries isn't exactly conducive to staying sane. Of course we're lunatics. So how about you, huh? Did it eat at you? Did

it hurt? You ran away, and now you're the only one who can live in comfort, but who gets to wipe your ass for you? You ever think about that? 'You don't know?' Screw you. You never *wanted* to know. You pretend you don't know so you can avoid all the uncomfortable things, ignore everything that's inconvenient for you... Have you ever even truly, genuinely thought about him...?!"

Takaya stiffened, still glaring with all his might at Chiaki.

"...I do think about him..."

"Stop lying! You never thought about anything except finding a place to hide. How to conveniently interpret things to your liking, how to escape. You weren't thinking about him—you were trying to figure out how to protect yourself. That's how you drove him mad, and *you're* the victim? Yeah right. You're nowhere close to being on the victim side of the damn equation here."

"I do think about him!" Takaya yelled. "I think about him every day, I'm always thinking about him! I can't even...!"

"That's bull! All you ever think about is finding a way to escape.

You've never thought about how you can save him. You wanna pretend you're the only normal one here, but in the end you're just another conceited, selfish little lordling who thinks nothing about sacrificing people. Screw you, Kagetora. You're not even conscious of your own sins...but you're the one who'll fall to hell first, you bastard!"

Takaya was frozen speechlessly in place. "Chiaki..."

"I don't know what happened between you and Naoe in [Toyama](#) , but if you wanna know about him that much, let him do what he wants to do more than anything else. Then you'll know him plenty well. You and your fucking superiority complex."

Takaya's fists shook.

"..."

Unable to endure any longer, Takaya abruptly turned his back on Chiaki and walked away. He didn't look back.

He left alone through the park exit, and Chiaki didn't chase after him.

He only looked at Takaya's receding figure...and let him go without a murmur.

That's only because you do not know me.

The words Naoe had spoken at the "river embankment" in [Toyama](#) echoed endlessly in his memory.

The tears he had seen on Naoe's face then... now swelled beneath his own eyelids—and drove him to fury.

Something within him had started crumbling that day. *That day.*

For there had been a man who had used his own body as a shield to

protect him from flying shards of glass.

He was the one those shards should have struck. He had always thought it a matter of course that the part of the shield would be his to play. He had never imagined himself so weak as to need someone else to protect him. Nor did he merit such sacrifice. It was his lot to work for the benefit of those much cleverer than he—those the world needed. He'd assumed that that would be his life, that it was all a miserable idiot like him would be fit to do. He would find work, find someone who could use him, wear down his life for some small amount money, live his life to the best of his ability and die. He was expendable. That was how he had thought of his life.

He had never expected much from his future. And yet... There existed a man who had risked his life to keep him safe, insignificant as he was. What sort of an idiot would waste his life for him? He should be taking care of someone else. Someone worthy. There must be many such people needing protection.

Or maybe... Maybe there was logic to what he'd done after all. It hadn't been him that the man had been protecting, no matter the end result. For Naoe, there existed one of far more worth than 'Ougi Takaya'...

(He was protecting 'Kagetora'...wasn't he?)

He wanted to thrust Naoe away at the thought. Why, then, did he keep

turning as if to make sure Naoe was still beside him? Why was he so terrified of finding only an empty space the next time he turned, yet even more relieved to find him there each time? What was this feeling?

Naoe— Is this running away? Am I still simply trying to protect myself? Am I trying to escape, as Chiaki said? I truly am...a little afraid of understanding you.

You do know. You just don't wanna admit it.

(Admit it...?)

What Naoe's actions meant...

Which feelings had he called "a lie?" The loyalty of a vassal towards his master? That was the only thing that made sense, wasn't it? Did that mean that the loyalty he had shown Kagetora had been a lie...? No. That wasn't what he had meant. Then what? Was the answer why he had looked at Takaya with such hatred in his eyes?

(I should probably just admit it.)

If he did, if he accepted his doubts as truth, then truth it would likely become.

And yet...

Takaya stood in front of the ubiquitous line of public telephones within the busy, bustling crowd at [Ikebukuro Station](#) .

The queue swapped with those who had finished their business at the phones, a constantly shifting exchange. Within this busy city where everyone moved at breakneck speed, Takaya alone stood still.

He gripped the receiver and pressed a button, the path of his finger tracing the phone number to the Tachibana residence Naoe had once given

him. The phone rang twice, thrice. Takaya waited nervously, counting each terrifyingly long ring tone. But...was no one home? No one answered. He hadn't been sure about this to begin with. Maybe he didn't really want anyone to answer after all. His finger reached for the push button to end the call.

There was the sound of the other receiver being picked up, and a slightly distant-sounding voice came back to him.

"Yes? This is Tachibana..."

"Ah, um..." The voice had so startled him that it rendered him speechless for a moment.

"Hello...?"

The voice belonged to a middle-aged woman. Probably his mother. The absolute calmness of the voice drained away Takaya's tension slightly.

"...Ah, I'm sorry. My name is Ougi. Is Yoshiaki...san...there...?"

"Yoshiaki?" The woman repeated in a somewhat puzzled tone. Then: "just a minute," he heard, followed by on-hold music.

(What should I do...?)

He was the one who had called, but what should he say when Naoe answered? Naoe hadn't contacted him at all after leaving [Toyama](#) .

Takaya hadn't had any particular purpose in mind when he had picked up the phone; if Naoe asked him "then why did you call?" what could he answer?

(If I could just hear his voice...)

"Hello—..."

His heart stuttered at the voice, but it belonged to the woman who had answered the phone, not Naoe.

"I'm sorry, but Yoshiaki seems to be out. He left early this morning, and left a note saying that he would be going on an extended trip..."

"An extended trip?"

"Yes." She added in the tone of a worried mother, "Just when I thought he might stay quietly at home for a little while this time, off he goes again. He left with a woman he met yesterday... He'll probably spend tonight away as well. I don't mind him going on dates, but staying out for several days at a time... I really worry about that child..."

She sounded very much like the fond mother. He wouldn't call a man approaching thirty a "child", he thought, but—well, he couldn't exactly tell her there was nothing to worry about, could he? After all, having a son who was gone for days at a time without telling anyone where he

was going, who came home again with serious injuries and a smashed-up car didn't exactly contribute to a mother's peace of mind. Even if she did seem fairly resigned to it by now...

"I can take a message if you would like to leave one for him..."

"Ah, it's okay... It not that important..."

If the conversation continued and she asked what connection he had to Naoe, what answer could he give? He hurriedly ended the call with thanks and hung up.

His shoulders slumped as he heaved a sigh. Extended trip? What did that mean? And his mother said that he was with a woman. A woman with whom

he was staying out overnight.

(And he said he wasn't seeing anyone...)

Why did it make him so mad? Oh, maybe because he'd been beside himself

worrying about Naoe while the man himself was off having fun with some woman?

(What the hell is he thinking?!)

So he was just an idiot for agonizing over everything, after all. Was this the kind of person Naoe was, then? Someone who got himself into a snit, then lashed out at Takaya in an outburst of anger and said whatever hurtful things he wanted?

To hell with this. Let him resolve it however he wants.

(Guess I'm just the idiot who lets himself get pushed around.)

It just proved that Naoe was the one who didn't think about others, he thought, as reaction to the endless anguish and worry he'd been going through over the past few days flared hot inside him. Rage overtook all other emotions as Takaya turned sharply from the phone. "Screw this." He headed straight for the JR ticket examination counter.

"You let him go home on his own?!" Yuzuru demanded through gritted teeth upon Chiaki's return. Ayako, Saori, and Yuiko were wide-eyed at the news as well. "I can't believe you! Tell me you're joking! This isn't like getting home from school!"

"Whatever!" It didn't sound like Chiaki's anger from his earlier quarrel had abated either. "He's not some goddamn kid!" he spat. "If he wants to get back to [Matsumoto](#) on his own, he can take the train or whatever the hell he wants. Screw him, dammit. I've had enough of this crap. Like I'd keep hanging around a selfish bastard like him anyway."

"Selfish bastard...? What're you talking about? Did you two have a fight?"

"A fight? If I could, I would've settled all of this a long time ago.

That idiot is diving head-first off the deep end. I don't know what

happened to him, but he should just let it happen and be done with it already. It's not like he's gonna lose anything. He should just stop making a goddamn fuss about it like some little kid."

"Huh...?"

Unable to make sense of his rant, Yuzuru and the others just stared at him. "Feh!" Chiaki spat, seething, and turned away.

"So-so what about Takaya? Did he already leave?"

"How the hell would I know? The blockhead can do whatever he goddamn pleases."

Fuming himself, Yuzuru ran for the entrance. Saori rushed after him.

"Wa-wait, Narita-kuuuuun!"

But by the time Yuzuru started after him, it was too late: Takaya had already taken the earlier train out of [Toshima Amusement Park](#) .

Ayako, who had remained behind, glanced at Chiaki seated ill-temperedly on a park bench.

"What are you so worked up about? Don't tell me you can't even mediate a fight."

"Whatever. Just looking at those two pisses me off. Naoe is...Naoe.

He's so freakin' hot and cold. If he's gonna give up, then he should just give up already. If he can't, then he might as well take it all the way. 'Cause that idiot's so thick he won't have a clue until it happens."

"You've got a temper like a short fuse. What'll happen if their lord-retainer relationship cracks apart? It's because they can't do what you're suggesting that I feel sorry for them."

"You're still talking about a lord and retainer relationship *now*? Man, that makes me laugh. Bit too late for that, don't you think? And if you leave 'em alone, it'll just be Minako all over again. Admit it. We're making zero progress here."

"And since you're such a thick-skinned guy, you're okay with that?" Ayako asked resignedly. "Naoe doesn't want history to repeat itself either, so he's been wracking his brain trying to figure out what to do."

"But when you get right down to it, Naoe's already exhausted every answer he could come up with over the past four hundred years." Chiaki glared up at the sky. "It's Kagetora who's got to come up with the answers now. *This time*, he can't just turn tail and run. He's got to solve this instead of running away."

"..."

"Even if it means ending everything."

Ayako gazed grimly at Chiaki's profile. A roller coaster passing overhead broke the silence and, for just a moment, shadowed the sun blazing down on their skin.

Takaya had the acute feeling that Tokyo was overcrowded. The sight of the masses of people coming and going was unnatural to someone born and raised in [Matsumoto](#) .

And the so-called speed of the city was almost obscene. The flow of people was like river rapids, and anyone attempting to move against the current became an obstacle and was quickly forced out. He had the distinct impression that a person would get tossed every which way and never reach where he wanted to go without a considerable amount of will

Takaya felt suffocated as he moved within the crowd in [Shinjuku's](#) underground passage.

(It's like I can't breathe...)

He'd apparently run headlong into the evening rush hour crowd. A horrible sense of exhaustion spread like a disease here. None of the people looked like people. Perhaps they didn't see him as a person, either. But right now he was thankful for that apathy.

He couldn't avoid running into people who knew him wherever he went in a small city like [Matsumoto](#) .

Trivial blunders spread through the grapevine in a flash, and before long everyone would be looking at him with contempt and disdain. Those hard gazes had followed him everywhere in junior high.

But blessed apathy reigned here in Tokyo. Though he might be

suffocating in this sea of people, his heart was liberated. There was no one to disapprove of him whatever he did. —Perhaps that was all freedom was.

Catching sight of a vagrant sleeping behind a newspaper stand along a wall, Takaya thought: no one is pitied here. So surely he, too, could make a living here.

He climbed a flight of stairs and emerged out of the eastern exit in front of [Studio Alta](#) . Complete darkness had already fallen. There was no way to compare [Matsumoto](#) and this city; the neon signs, energy, and crowds colored the night. Perhaps it was even more alive now than during the day.

Takaya lit a cigarette from the pack he'd purchased at a vending machine earlier as he took the pedestrian crossing towards [Kabuki Town](#) .

Though it'd been a while since he'd smoked, memories suddenly layered the smell of the cigarette. This scent—it reminded him of someone...

(Oh...)

He bit lightly into the cigarette.

(...This is your scent...) he suddenly realized, looking blankly up at the neon signs of the red-light district. He would probably scold Takaya if he caught him wandering around in a place like this.

(Fucking idiot...) he cursed himself, and walked on angrily, aimlessly. Loud, lewd invitations, dirty music, whiffs of alcohol, out-of-sight couples and dilapidated old men... College students growing more prodigal as they commingled...

(They're all idiots.)

Japan's pre-eminent pleasure quarter was also the destination of Japan's biggest fools. But of course—

(I'm one of those fools, too.)

He spotted an arcade and went inside. For anyone wanting to be alone without a concern for the time, there was no better place.

(I can do whatever I want.)

He didn't want to return anywhere tonight, Takaya thought as he slipped into the sea of humanity.

Even the notorious [Kabuki Town](#) quieted down as the time for the last train approached. But of course

it was never empty, for there were always the drunks passed out on the street and the hard-core carousers determined to party the night away.

It was probably past midnight. Takaya had thrown himself down on the road in front of [Koma Theater](#) .

He'd gone looking for a drink after leaving the arcade, but for some reason the alcohol had overwhelmed him with dismal speed today. He'd managed to stagger out on dangerously unsteady feet, but didn't have very clear memories of what happened after that. He'd somehow found himself seated in front of [Koma Theater](#) , and the next thing he knew, he

was sprawled on his side.

There was a lit cigarette in his mouth, just dangling from his lips; half of it had already burned to ash and fallen to the ground. Takaya didn't particularly feel like smoking—he only wanted to be able to breathe in that scent.

His body, heavy and sluggish with the alcohol, settled along the concrete, and his eyelids began to droop. His half-lidded gaze followed a boisterous group of what appeared to be college students as it approached.

(Nothing to do with me...)

Not like they'd bother with someone sleeping on the street, he thought, when—

"Hey, lookee here!" one of the young men exclaimed jubilantly, ambling over. "This is perfect, man. I just ran out of Parliaments..."

The student, by the looks of him no stranger to this part of town, stopped next to Takaya. He reached for the pack of cigarettes, which still had a few sticks remaining. Perhaps he thought Takaya was asleep and in no condition to start an argument.

"Hey, wait a minute," Takaya interrupted as the student removed a cigarette and moved to put the pack in his pocket. He sat up. The student turned and looked at Takaya. He appeared to be pretty far gone as well.



"What, you were awake?" he grumbled, raising the cigarette to his lips. Takaya stood and swiped it out of his hand.

"Wh-what the hell?"

"Fuck you." Takaya glared at the student. "Those're my fucking cigarettes."

"Cigarettes? Yeah...I'm all out... Sorry dude. Just lemme have this, 'kay? I'll give you some money, and you go get yourself a new pack, yeah?" he said, producing some small change which he slipped into Takaya's hand. Temper frayed by the casual contact, Takaya threw the coins down on the road. The student's friends turned at the sound.

"Wh-what the hell are you doing? Said I'll pay for the cigarettes, didn't I? So what is your problem?"

"Fuck you, you asshole. Gimme my fucking cigarettes. I don't want another pack, I want mine back."

Startled by Takaya's anger but bolstered by the alcohol in his system, the student refused to back down. "I told you, go buy yourself a new pack. Keep the change. Go find a vending machine somewhere. What the hell is this guy's problem?"

He took out the pack of cigarettes, put one in his mouth, and lit it.

Takaya's face twisted with rage. He threw a fist into the side of the student's face without another word. The girls in the group screamed as the punch sent the young man tumbling to the ground. The other students shouted in protest.

"What the hell are you doing, kid?!"

"A dirty little bastard like you shouldn't be smoking those things anyway!"

There was nothing but rage left in Takaya's mind.

"Those're mine. Don't you fucking touch them with your filthy hands...!"

"Fuck you!"

The drunk students came on en masse. Takaya filled his body with <<power>>—before suddenly coming back to himself.

(No, I can't...!)

It had frightened them. Takaya took a knee to the solar plexus and collapsed to the ground, and the fight became a thrashing. As he crouched there enduring the rain of blows, his gaze fell on the

discarded cigarette box, now trampled and crushed.

(...bastards...!)

He clawed at the ground, teeth gritted in rage. But he was helpless. A foot stomped down on his outstretched hand, and he drew it back and covered his head, trying to shield himself from the pain.

The students finally left, elated with their victory. Still hunched over, Takaya finally reached out and gripped the crushed box, cradling it gently in a shaking hand.

He didn't know how long he lay there on the cold concrete. But he gradually noticed someone standing there gazing down at him.

It was a man.

He looked around Naoe's age. Not as tall, though. One hand held a black briefcase. The eyes beneath his dark eyebrows were quiet as they regarded him.

There was pity on his face...

What Takaya didn't know was that this man had been following him for quite some time. He'd never even noticed. This man of unknown intentions, who could blend his shadow into the deep city night and melt away at will, had been tracking Takaya's movements, and had only now chosen to reveal himself at last.

He now spoke to Takaya for the first time.

"—That was quite reckless..."

"..."

"If you wanted, you could have sent them all flying with a single blow. Isn't that so...?"

Takaya made no response. He lay unmoving upon the concrete even as the cold seeped into his wounded body.

"Did you wish to be beaten so badly?" the man asked. He took off his coat, knelt, and gently wrapped it around Takaya's shoulders.

"Leave me alone."

Though he spurned the man, the coat's warmth made him ache. He hid his face behind his hands as his eyes suddenly blurred and grew hot with tears.

"I'm not running away."

"..."

"I'm not running away from 'Kagetora'. He's the one running away, hiding... Isn't he...?"

A small drop slipped through his wet fingers and fell to the concrete.

"Why...did it have to end up like this?" Takaya mumbled, then stopped, still crouched, shivering like a tiny rabbit.

The man watched over him, saying nothing for a long moment. Then he asked hesitantly, "... Will you...come with me? You don't want to be

alone right now, yes...?"

Raising a bruised and swelling face, Takaya looked at the man for the first time out of eyes wet with tears. The stranger's expression seemed to hold a trace of protectiveness as he looked down at Takaya.

"You're injured and...it's chilly here...you'll catch a cold," the man added, and held out a hand to him, palm up. Takaya closed his eyes. Tears spilled over and fell. The warmth of the hand made his chest tighten. Relief and loneliness blended together within him. The name on his lips was carried away by the wind sweeping through the damp city night.

Chapter 4: Message from the Mirror

Tachibana Yoshiaki's family lived in [Utsunomiya City](#) , [Tochigi Prefecture](#)

Their family temple, the [Shingon Kougen Temple](#) , had one of the largest congregations in the city.

Asaoka Maiko alighted from her taxi and was immediately taken aback by the size of the temple. Though she had heard about it from her aunt, she had not thought that it would be so large. This was certainly not the tiny building tucked snugly away into a corner of the residential district she had imagined; the grounds were expansive enough to be a park and had the structures to match. She realized now, looking at the magnificent tile roofing of the main temple building, that this was what she had seen glittering in the summer sunlight as she rode into town on the electric train.

The children of the neighborhood catching cicadas among the temple's giant camphor trees certainly seemed to find it a delightful playground. Maiko, looking over at the family quarters, hesitated.

(I'm probably a bit early...)

She had arrived around twenty minutes early. The temple's schedule was probably packed with memorial services and the like, so it would be more polite to wait until her appointment—except she didn't quite have the willpower to stand around outside in the summer heat. Maiko resolutely headed for the family quarters.

"Excuse me?" She rang the doorbell.

She could hear sutra chanting from the main temple—she must have arrived in the middle of a memorial service. No one appeared to be home, and Maiko stood there uncertainly for a moment.

Two or three minutes later, a middle-aged woman dressed in elegant traditional Japanese robes appeared at the sliding door.

"Thank you very much for waiting."

"Aah, er, excuse me. Good afternoon, my name is Asaoka. Asaoka Maiko—I called a few days ago..."

After a pause, the woman gave a small nod as she recognized Maiko's name. "The niece of Asaoka from the second district, I believe? Yes, of course. Yoshiaki mentioned your call. Please come in. Ah, it sounds like the service is not yet finished. You may have to wait for a little bit..."

"No, that's fine. I'm actually early, so..."

"Here, come in, come in. Isn't it hot today? Let me bring you some cold barley tea."

Maiko bowed her head gratefully. "I'm sorry for the bother."

As Mrs. Tachibana welcomed her with every courtesy, Maiko realized that this elegant lady was probably laboring under something of a misconception.

"Really, I just don't know what to do with him. Still unsettled at twenty-eight! Everyone wants to help him find a good match, but he doesn't seem to take any interest at all... I'm always telling him that if he's seeing someone, he should bring her home and let us meet her."

"...Ah..."

"Well, I'm glad that he has. He's a bit rough around the edges, but please look after him...?"

Mrs. Tachibana had apparently mistaken her for the girlfriend of this Yoshiaki—he must not have told her Maiko's reason for coming. Well, this is awkward, she thought, smiling noncommittally. Anyway, the man himself could clear up the misunderstanding when he turned up.

She had actually only talked to him on the phone for the first time a few days ago. He was, in fact, a complete stranger to her. Her aunt, a parishioner of this temple, was the one who had introduced him to her.

Incredible as it might sound, her aunt's family had once experienced a haunting (though about ten years ago now). It had gotten so out of hand that the family, at their wits' end, had come to consult with the abbot of the temple. His third son, Yoshiaki, though only a monk-in-training at the time, had come to deal with the problem, and everything had settled right down.

And he'd gone about it in the oddest way. There was no cedar-stick burning rite or sutra-chanting; he only examined the spirit for a moment, then suddenly called out '[Bishamonten](#) !'

in invocation. Since her aunt couldn't see spirits, she couldn't tell whether or not the ghost had truly disappeared per Yoshiaki's claim, but since strange things stopped happening afterwards, she concluded that he must have exorcised it. The whole process hadn't taken more than three minutes.

When asked, Yoshiaki had explained that a malicious weasel spirit had taken possession of the hanging scroll in the alcove, which had recently been purchased in an antique store and was very, very old.

"Shady," had been Maiko's first thought when she had heard the story from her aunt.

After all, this was exactly how religious cults preyed on people's gullibility to pull them in, so a story like that hadn't exactly left a good impression on her. It didn't matter how many times Maiko told her aunt how silly it was—she seemed to have become a believer in Tachibana

Yoshiaki. Besides, he had refused all payment for clearing out the ghost. She was only an ordinary temple parishioner now—she was just seduced by his character, her aunt had laughed.

If she hadn't been touched by the supernatural herself, Maiko would probably never have believed her aunt's story.

That Maiko was willing to bend her own beliefs so far as to pay a visit to Yoshiaki attested to her desperation.

"I'm sorry for the long wait..."

She had been there for about thirty minutes before Yoshiaki appeared.

His height was a surprise, his fine-featured face and serene eyes even more so. If someone had told her he was an actor, she would have believed it. His gentle bearing and calm poise belied his twenty-eight years.

The memorial service had apparently run late, and he was still wearing his ceremonial robes. Despite his youth, the traditional Japanese robes became him, and his broad shoulders cut quite an impressive figure in the [jikitotsu](#) and [gojou-kesa](#) . It emphasized that incongruous serenity even more—yet his reserved and humble demeanor kept her from being intimidated.

Maiko thought she could understand now what her aunt had meant by being seduced. Though she was meeting him for the first time, Maiko felt dazzled for a moment.

"I apologize for my appearance. We started a little late—it appears the family had a flat on their way over, and it took a little while to change the tire..." he explained, smiling. He had apparently sensed her nervousness at their first meeting and was trying to put her at her ease. What a wonderful person, Maiko thought.

"My my my. What is this, Yoshiaki-san? Dressed like that, you'll make the entire room smell of incense."

Mrs. Tachibana entered carrying tea pastries. Maiko noted the look of trepidation that flashed across Yoshiaki's face.

"Mother, we are in a temple. It probably smells of incense everywhere."

"What are you talking about? Show a little more concern for the ladies. While we might live in temple, it would certainly not do to have the smell of incense everywhere. It is a matter of delicacy. Don't tell me you haven't even considered that."

Yoshiaki, evidently, was no match for his mother. He was the youngest of the Tachibana family's four children. Teruhiro, the eldest, was a realtor; both Yoshiaki and his older brother Yoshihiro worked for their father in the temple (their sister, Saeko, was married and resided in Tokyo). Teruhiro lived on the temple grounds with his family in a detached building, while the second son, who was about to be married in the autumn, would become heir to the temple. Only Yoshiaki's future was up in the air, though he himself seemed completely unconcerned about that fact.

He appeared to be feeling a rather strong push from his family, however.

"You see? This is why things are always broken off as soon as you start getting somewhere," Mrs. Tachibana complained, though he was always the one to break things off. Even so, Yoshiaki didn't seem to want to defy his mother carelessly.

"I understand, Mother. Please rest inside so we can talk."

"Well! Are you not even going to introduce your future wife to me?"

"Mother..."

Yoshiaki pressed a hand against his forehead as his shoulders slumped in exhaustion.

"How has your brother been?" Tachibana Yoshiaki—or rather [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) finally got to the purpose for her visit after Mrs. Tachibana had left.

At his question, Maiko shook her head despondently. "He's still unconscious. It's like he's in a vegetative state, and the machines are the only things keeping him alive..."

A shadow darkened Maiko's face.

"The doctor said that there isn't much chance of him returning to consciousness. Words to that effect, anyway... My family doesn't want to give up yet."

"And you?"

"Me?" Maiko lifted her eyes sharply. "How could I give up after those dreams?!"

"Then...you're still dreaming about him?"

Maiko nodded, and her gaze fell back to the low table.

"And the reflection in the mirror...?"

Maiko nodded again and covered her face with her hands.

She had told him her story on the phone a few days ago. This was why Maiko, who didn't believe in psychic phenomenon, had come to ask for Tachibana Yoshiaki's help.

Her brother, Asaoka Shinya, had been rushed to the hospital after a car accident left him comatose one late night in [Nikkou](#) just about a month ago. The Asaoka family ran a Japanese inn on the banks of [Lake Chuuzenji](#), and her brother had been taking some friends to the [Toubu Nikkou Station](#). He had just gotten his license, and should probably not have been driving the [Iroha Hill Road](#) at night. He had missed a curve and crashed into the guardrail.

Fortunately, his passengers had not suffered any serious injuries; Shinya, however, had needed an ambulance, and was still in serious condition...even though there were no signs of external physical trauma, and he only seemed to have hit his head...

A little while later, he began appearing in Maiko's dreams.

She had that strange dream every night. At first she had thought that they were caused by her worry for her brother, but for some reason, the dream was always the same.

Her brother was in what looked like a forest. He was naked, and weirdly, his lower half was merged with the large trunk of a Japanese cedar tree.

"Help me, [Nee-san](#)," he begged her. "I can't get out of his tree. Help me, [Nee-san](#)."

His pleas were so vivid in her mind that she awoke soaked in sweat. The dream repeated night after night, endlessly.

A little while later, one of the students who had been riding in her brother's car told her a strange story: Shinya hadn't gotten into the accident because he'd missed a curve—he'd been swerving to avoid something, though they didn't know what it was. They only knew that right before it happened, Shinya had given a blood-curdling scream, terror on his face. That was when he had wrenched the wheel around and hit the guardrail.

Maiko had been convinced of the strangeness of the incident a week ago, when she had seen Shinya's reflection from the mirror in her empty room. Only half of Shinya appeared in the reflection—the rest was simply not there. Thereafter, Maiko saw her brother whenever she looked at herself in the mirror or at any reflective surface. Shaken by these freakish events, Maiko had gone crying to the one who seemed to know the most about things spirit-related: her aunt.

Which was how she had ended up seated in front of Naoe.

"This is a difficult case," Naoe said, face grim. "This is—how should I put it... The dreams you're having of you brother are probably...well, I suppose something like a telepathic sending. You can think of them as a message from him."

"Does that mean that my brother is conscious? That he's not dead...?"

"It's almost as if he wants to regain consciousness but cannot. That is

probably why he's asking for your help. But this reflection in the mirror..."

Maiko peered at Naoe's dubious expression.

"It's strange, isn't it. In cases like this, we can consider two scenarios. Both have to do with vengeful spirits."

"Vengeful spirits?" Maiko shuddered at the words.

Naoe continued, "There are two kinds of what are commonly called vengeful spirits. The characters that form the word for 'vengeful spirit' can also be interpreted as 'living spirit,' and the first type is exactly that: ghosts that are alive. In other words, spirits separated from their bodies. The second type points to a thought-sending from a living person, created so that they can appear in front of someone far away and somehow harm them. It's also called astral projection."

"..."

"In your case, the former sounds more likely. Your brother's soul has been separated from his body. It has come to you, and you are able to see it in mirrors... Or perhaps..."

"..."

"The mirror itself has become a kind of medium and is transmitting your brother's messages. I would guess it's one of the two. Why your brother is asking for your help, what circumstances prompted it—in order to

answer these questions, we must first determine which of these two is happening," Naoe explained. He looked calmly into Maiko's eyes. "I do not see any trace of your brother's soul around you."

"Wh—"

Maiko sat up abruptly and looked around, a chill running through her. Could he really see things like that? she wondered.

"You can still see your brother every time you look into a mirror? That fact has not changed?"

"Yes, I still see him."

She had glimpsed him just that morning as she'd been stepping out.

After a moment of thought, Naoe stood and asked her to follow him.

They walked down the corridor toward the main temple. Naoe stopped Maiko in front of a large full-length mirror along the way. Standing beside her, he asked, "Please look into the mirror. Do you see your brother reflected within?"

Maiko gazed at herself in the mirror. Though she should have been used to it by now, she still started as she saw her brother at her right shoulder. She could only see his naked upper half, his pale face. She met her brother's eyes in the mirror before looking away in bewilderment.

"He's there. In the mirror. I can see him so clearly."

"..."

Not so Naoe. He studied the space around her before looking back at the mirror.

"I cannot, as I suspected would be the case. This appears to be a message directed at a specific person, using mirrors as a medium."

Maiko turned and looked up into Naoe's face. She saw no trace of deception. "Then... Then what's happening to my brother?! What do I need to do to help him...?!"

Naoe's knowing eyes glowered into the mirror, and he stood deep in thought for a moment.

"Very well. Let us visit your brother tomorrow. We won't know anything until we do so in person," Naoe decided, before regarding Maiko coldly. "Are you free for the day tomorrow? I would like you to take me to your brother's hospital."

"Ye-yes..."

Maiko wanted to shrink back from Naoe's sharp glare. But everything else was secondary to her brother right now. Maiko nodded and bowed gratefully. "An-and how much should I pay? For the investigation and such?"

"Investigation...?"

Maiko was evidently still stuck on the religious cult idea. Naoe blinked, and the edge vanished from his eyes. She saw him smile again

for the first time since the beginning of their conversation.

"That's rather funny. ...I see. Please put your mind at ease. You could say this is something of a philanthropic enterprise for me—I would never charge for it."

A day later, Takaya and company would arrive in Tokyo on their own investigation.

Asaoka Maiko's family ran a Japanese inn near [Lake Chuuzenji](#) in [Nikkou City](#) .

The next day, Naoe left the house early and headed for Nikkou. They had arranged to meet at [Toubu Nikkou Station](#) before visiting Shinya at the hospital together.

Utsunomiya's bachelor monk arrived on the dot. Maiko didn't recognize him at first, and started when he called to her.

"Yoshiaki-san...?"



The man standing next to what appeared to be a new car was unmistakably the Tachibana Yoshiaki from yesterday. What had changed was his attire in the dark suit and sunglasses, he gave the impression of being a young businessman at first glance—possibly even someone with connections to a gangster organization. He looked, at any rate, like a totally different person, and the masculinity now layered on his usual poise dazzled her all over again.

"Climb in," he invited, opening the passenger's door for her. He was more like a private secretary to some company's president than a businessman, Maiko decided, feeling almost like the daughter of said company's president herself. The Toyota Windom he was driving had been purchased just a few days earlier. She had heard from her aunt that the Tachibana family owned a Mercedes Benz, a Ferrari, and something

domestically manufactured. According to Naoe, that last had been totaled by him, so he had been forbidden use of the cars for away trips. He had purchased this Windom for his exclusive use, so he was happy to say that if anything happened to it, he wouldn't get any complaints from his family.

"Well then, shall we be off?" Naoe said, and started the engine.

"This area is pretty crowded in the summer, not surprisingly," Naoe commented, looking at the Japanese inns lined up on both sides of the street as they drove down the national highway in front of the station. He appeared to have sensed Maiko's nervousness and was trying to make light conversation.

"That's true," Maiko replied, looking at Naoe's profile. "But summer vacation is almost over, so... It'll be packed again for the fall leaves season, though. [Iroha Hill](#) is usually crammed with cars from end to end, it's awful."

"Hahah... I guess it must be. I've been here a number of times—it's such a beautiful place. Those gorgeous red leaves. I'm also quite fond of Nikkou." He gave her a quick sideways glance, smiling so amiably that she couldn't help but smile back.

(He said he's been here a few times...) she thought, suddenly suspicious. (bet it was with a girlfriend or something.)

"Ah, the statue of [High Priest Tenkai](#)," Naoe interrupted her thoughts

almost deliberately as he spotted the figure at the foot of Nikkou Bridge. [High Priest Tenkai](#) , who had begun the restoration of [Rinnou Temple](#) , was a famous figure who had woven his strategies from the shadows at [Tokugawa Ieyasu](#) 's right hand.

A little past it was the famed "Sacred Bridge ," a beautiful vermilion-lacquered bridge which also spanned the Daiya River. Legend had it that [Holy Priest Shoudou](#) , who had founded the first temple at Nikkou, had beseeched the gods for

aid in crossing the violent current of the Daiya River. [Great King Jinja](#) had appeared in answer to his prayers and thrown down two snakes, a red and a green, which transformed into a bridge.

The souvenir shops and Japanese inns began appearing a little further on; the shrine path to Mt. Nikkou—[Toushou Shrine](#) , [Rinnou Temple](#) , and [Futarasan Shrine](#) —was in this area.

"Speaking of which, I heard something from my brother last night—" Naoe said, tone quiet again. "Some sort of treasure was stolen from [Toushou Shrine](#) a few months ago. Do you know of it?"

"Ah...yes..." She had heard of the incident, at least. It had happened two or three months ago. Coincidentally, a college friend visiting the area had been staying with her, and Maiko had noticed the swarm of patrol cars and police officers while showing her around [Toushou Shrine](#) . She'd thought it odd at the time. She only heard about the theft on the news later.

"I was rather busy at the time, and missed it on the news... Would you happen to know what treasure was stolen?"

"Um...I think..." Maiko searched her memory. "The Sacred Mirror or something like that?"

Naoe's eyes suddenly sharpened. "The Sacred Mirror?"

"Yes. I heard that it had some sort of important connection to Lord Ieyasu, and was of significant cultural value. I think it was the only thing that was taken. It was kept in the inner part of the shrine where the general public couldn't enter, though, so a friend of mine who owns a souvenir shop said that it must've been an inside job or something ridiculous like that..."

"... They haven't caught the perpetrator yet, I assume?"

"No, I don't think they have."

Naoe frowned and turned the wheel. His expression had turned so serious that it practically screamed that he knew something; Maiko unthinkingly asked, "What is it?"

"Ah...nothing. It just caught my attention when you mentioned a mirror. I'm probably just thinking too much. ...Which way is the hospital? Should I keep following this road?"

"Yes," Maiko answered, giving him a verbal description of the route. The hospital was about four kilometers ahead.

Shinya had a private hospital room at the end of the second floor.

The hospital was relatively large for the area. Maiko, who visited

almost daily, could pretty much call the doctors and nurses her acquaintances. After asking a nurse she was particularly close to to convey the reason for their visit to the doctor in charge, she guided Naoe to her brother's room.

"This is my brother Shinya," Maiko said, looking at the young man stretched out on the bed. His face in seeming-repose looked younger than his nineteen years, and though he was older than Takaya, he could be mistaken for someone younger. Tubes ran from his body to the imposing line of machines that were somehow keeping him alive.

Naoe took off his sunglasses and looked down silently at Shinya.

"I see no external injuries of any kind."

Maiko replied haggardly, "It's what people call a vegetative state, I guess. No matter how we call to him, he doesn't wake up.... It's already been two months."

Maiko looked down, biting her lip lightly.

"The car wasn't even damaged that badly, and the accident wasn't a very big deal. His girlfriend was riding with him, but she only suffered a bit of whiplash—she walked away without any injuries at all. So why was he the only one..."

"..."

Maiko stopped and fell into a silence filled only with the hum of the machinery. There was no sense of life from the doll-life face. It

seemed Shinya was just barely able to breathe on his own. He possessed

the corneal, pupillary, and pharyngeal reflexes which indicated that he was not brain-dead—and yet...he languished in some kind of sleeping sickness.

"He's such a mysterious boy..." Maiko finally said despondently.

"There's never been any hint of supernatural abilities in my family's blood—until him. Even though he couldn't see ghosts or anything."

"...?"

"He sometimes had precognitive dreams," Maiko explained, looking up at Naoe. "And it wasn't just déjà vu. He really knew things before they happened. A while ago, our cousin accidentally fell and died while working at a construction site. My brother saw it the night before it happened. He suddenly came crying to my room in the middle of the night and told me 'Kazuo-Niichan is going to die. He's going to fall from some tall place and die.' It

sounded ridiculous to me, so I tried to comfort him by telling him that it was only a dream. But the next day, our cousin died just like my brother said."

"..."

"It happened again maybe twice more after that... My brother's precognitive dreams only predicted when someone was going to die. At first, he would tell somebody every time he had one of those dreams, but they were too accurate, and he was afraid that people would think

he was creepy, so he stopped talking about them. He would try to warn people when he foresaw accidents, but they never listened, or maybe the accident still happened even if they did... I think it was like that sometimes... Even though he dreamed about the future, the place and time were often obscure, so he couldn't change them. ...No, even when he saw everything clearly there were always circumstances or reasons that somehow compelled people to take those paths. I guess you could say that he would only have been able to see those deaths in his dreams because they could not be changed. ...But he never talked to me about them again."

Maiko looked at her brother with pain on her face.

"But I knew. Whenever he heard about someone dying, his face would go *white*—like

he was thinking 'I knew it' or 'it's happened again.' Because of that, there were times when he seemed withdrawn... But recently it feels like he's finally opened up a bit and gradually gotten more upbeat, but..."

Maiko sighed deeply. "Maybe I'm just guessing at everything. But it must have hurt him so much. Maybe he would be happier just sleeping forever like this."

"... I...wonder about that."

Maiko abruptly raised her eyes at Naoe's words. He looked straight back at her.

"Your brother was asking for your help in your dream, was he not? I believe he must want to wake up. To return to consciousness as soon as

he can."

"But..." Maiko said in bewilderment, "I'm probably just having that dream because I'm thinking too much. And the mirror is probably just an illusion."

"No, that's not true."

Maiko's mouth closed at Naoe's almost violent denial.

"Asaoka-san, in order to save your brother, you must first believe in yourself. Which means you must believe in what your brother is trying to do, after conquering so much pain to get to where he is."

"... Tachibana-san."

"I believe that Shinya-kun would never want to run away from reality, no matter how painful," Naoe said quietly, looking down at Shinya lying lifeless and still in the hospital bed.

"Now that I have seen him, I finally understand the reason why he does not awaken..."

"Wh—..."

"This body is empty. No soul resides in this flesh. That's why I do not feel his 'energy.'"

Maiko gasped and peered at Shinya in shock. "His soul...isn't in his body...?"

"His body is here. But Shinya-san himself is not."

"Then...so that means...that my brother..."

Naoe muttered grimly, "For whatever reason, his soul has departed from his body. No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his soul was parted from his body."

"My brother... What's happened to him, then? Does that mean he'll never wake up?!"

"If his soul returns, he'll wake up immediately. The body missing its soul only appears dead, at least for a time. But if too much time lapses, there are many instances in which the body will truly die. In Shinya's case, his body is being kept alive by these machines..."

Face twisted almost demoniacally with desperation, Maiko demanded, "Then my brother's soul is...! Where is his soul?!"

"I don't know," Naoe replied, glaring at nothing. "We must find it.

Let's start with the place where we believe his soul left his body—the part of Iroha Hill where the accident took place. I won't be able to say anything until I've done a spirit-sensing at the site. You'll come with me, Asaoka-san?"

Chapter 5: Crimson Beast

To get to [Lake Chuuzenji](#) in inner Nikkou from [Nikkou City](#) , one must take the famous [Iroha Hill Road](#) , comprised of Iroha Hill Number One and Number Two, both one-way roads.

The downhill was Number One, the uphill Number Two; the uphill had twenty hairpin curves and the downhill twenty-eight, and together they formed the Forty-eight Characters of Iroha.

Asaoka Shinya's accident had taken place on the downhill road, Iroha Hill Number One. The narrow curves of Number One, combined with the poor condition of the road surface, meant that it had certainly seen its share of accidents.

What merited concern was the fact that the number of accidents resulting in deaths at [Iroha Hill](#) had increased in the last month. It had the locals wondering if

something was going on, and the same question turned over and over in Naoe's mind.

Since the roads were one-way, they had to first take the hill climb in order to reach Shinya's accident site. Naoe headed for [Lake Chuuzenji](#) on Iroha Hill Number Two.

Naoe had been frowning all the while as if he sensed something amiss around him. He hadn't enlightened Maiko as to the cause of his wariness. She resolutely posed the question: "Is something the matter?"

Snapping out of his thoughts, Naoe, responded "no", and stepped lightly on

the accelerator.

"Could I ask you something?" Making a sharp left easily with a measured turn of the steering wheel, Naoe asked. "About your dream?"

"The one where my brother appears?"

"Yes. I think that perhaps your dream offers us a place to start in our search for Shinya-kun's soul. Wherever your brother is in your dream may be a very important clue. You said that half of his body had been merged with a tree, correct?"

"Yes. And then he says, 'I can't get out of this tree. Help me.'"

"That tree..." Naoe's brows knitted slightly. ... "I wonder if it's a real tree—one that actually exists. Can you remember anything about the surroundings? Picture what sort of place it was...?"

Maiko concentrated on the thread of her memories. It took her a few minutes to bring the scene from her memory of the dream into focus.

"I think...there were trees all around—a cryptomeria forest. The one my brother is in is especially big... No, there are three. The one in the center seems really, really old, and my brother's tree is to its right. But... I can't really..." Maiko pressed a hand against her forehead. She had reached the limit of her recall.

"Is it somewhere familiar to you?"

"I'm not sure..." Maiko shook her head. "I have the feeling I've seen it

before, but... I couldn't tell you where. I'm sorry."

"..."

Naoe scowled grimly at the road ahead. They twisted around a curve marked with a sign bearing the Japanese hiragana 'chi' (ち) with a number 8. 'I can't get out of this tree...' Shinya's plea prickled at his thoughts. But what did that have to do with his reflection in the mirror?

Deep in thought, he paid no notice at all to [Iroha Hill](#)'s passing scenery as he drove carefully on.

"Ah! Stop the car, please!"

Naoe stepped on the brake in response to Maiko's request as they reached the top of [Iroha Hill](#), near Chuuzenji Hot Springs' bus terminal. Maiko had apparently caught sight of an acquaintance on the main street along the line of souvenir shops and Japanese inns.

"Eri-chan!" Maiko shouted from the car window. "It is Eri-chan, right?"

The young woman who turned toward them at the sound of her name was petite with short hair, around senior high school age. She seemed to have just stepped out of a bus. Startled by the sight of Maiko, she stopped still for a second before sprinting over.

"Maiko-san! Aaah, I'm so glad to see you!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you! I wanted to speak to you right away!"

Naoe understood why Maiko had called her over as soon as she introduced

Eri as her brother's girlfriend; she had been in the car at the time of the accident. The words spilled out of Eri as Maiko climbed out of the car.

"I called your family this morning, but they said that you had gone out and didn't know when you would be back. I couldn't bear just standing around, so I thought I'd wait at your house and took the bus here."

"There's something you wanted to talk to me about?"

Eri nodded earnestly, her voice pleading. "I had this dream. And in the dream! In the dream I saw Shinya!"

Startled, Naoe and Maiko looked at each other. Eri continued,

"Shinya-san came, and he spoke so clearly to me, but I couldn't understand him! I don't know...I couldn't figure out what he was trying to tell me! What is going on?!"

"E-Eri-chan..."

"You were telling me that you've been having these dreams about Shinya-san, so when I dreamed about him, I thought maybe that's what you meant. But...I don't know, so I thought, I have to come and talk to you about them...!"

Maiko looked at Naoe as she tried to soothe the excited Eri as if pleading for his help. Naoe asked calmly, "What did Shinya-kun tell you

in your dream? What did he say?"

Eri appeared to notice this unfamiliar man for the first time. She gestured warily as if to ask Maiko who this stranger was.

"Tachibana-san is an acquaintance of mine. I have been consulting with him about Shinya. It's okay to tell him," she coaxed, and Eri turned her pleading expression on him as well.

"I remember it really clearly even though it was a dream, because it was so vivid. This is what Shinya-san said: 'Break the mirror.' 'Kill the Crimson Beast.'"

"Break the mirror...?" Naoe quickly repeated. "That's what he said? Break the mirror?"

Eri nodded furiously. "I don't understand what it means. What mirror is he talking about?"

"..."

Both Maiko and Naoe immediately thought of Shinya's reflection in the mirror. But break the mirror? What was he trying to tell them? And that didn't explain—

"Crimson Beast?" Naoe's frown deepened. "The mirror and the Crimson Beast... it doesn't make sense. I wonder what they have to do with each other..."

As they stood puzzling over the cryptic message, they heard the distant wail of sirens approaching from the opposite direction before a line of

patrol cars crested [Iroha Hill](#) , passed next to them, and headed for Iroha Hill Number One.

"...I wonder if there's been an accident...?"

"Well, Mai-chan! Are you visiting with your boyfriend today?"

She looked across the street in the direction of the voice to see her friend from the souvenir shop passing the patrol cars toward them. Being a poster girl for Asaoka Inn, she had something of a reputation as a local beauty. Naturally, she knew a lot of people in the area, and was often greeted with familiarity when she was out and about.

"Oji-san! What was with all these patrol cars? Has there been an accident on Iroha?"

"Aah, just now? No accident, I'm afraid! What a terrible business! They say someone's jumped into [Kegon Falls](#) !"

"Jumped?"

Naoe's head jerked up in surprise. Though [Kegon Falls](#) was certainly a well-known tourist spot, it was also known for being a suicide spot. Not to say that it happened all that often, of course (though that it happened at all was bad enough), but this was the first time this season that a suicide had been witnessed.

"I guess he dove off from the viewing platform. Sounds like there were a lot of tourists, but no one even had the time to call out or try to stop him. —If you were planning to visit the falls, you'll want to wait a bit! They'll be sealing the place off, and nobody but the police will

be able to get in! You don't want to be at a suicide scene on your date!"

After dispensing his kindly(?) advice, the owner of Takamatsu Souvenir Shop invited them to visit him for all their souvenir needs on their return trip before departing. Though the shopkeeper's assumptions regarding their relationship had Maiko in mortified knots, Naoe seemed not at all bothered. Instead, he stood in deep thought, one hand on his chin.

"I-I'm sorry, Tachibana-san. ...He's always like that..."

"... Why don't we go take a look?"

"Wh...?"

Naoe turned to Maiko. "I feel like something doesn't add up, and it's bothering me... I guess you could call it a sixth sense, this nagging feeling of wrongness. It's been worrying me for a while now...but maybe taking a look at the scene will help me figure out what's causing it."

"Wrongness...?"

"I can't explain it very clearly, but..." Naoe said, tapping his temple, "it's the sense of a place. Or maybe I should say the 'energy' of a place. The keen spiritual energy I felt around [Mt. Nantai](#) when I came before..." He lifted sharp eyes. "It has been disrupted by an evil sort of worldliness...of vulgarity. This is not a place that should feel like that."

The hint of fear on Maiko's face was probably a feeling of awe towards one who commanded senses she could not understand.

They decided to find a place to park the car and proceed to [Kegon Falls](#) on foot.

It was about a five-minute walk from Chuuzenji Hot Springs Bus Terminal to [Kegon Falls](#), formed by the abundant waters of [Lake Chuuzenji](#) rushing over a 99-meter ^[1] rock cliff and renowned as one of Japan's three great waterfalls. A few

years ago, a rock slide had dumped a large rock into the middle of the wide current, choking the flow and dimming the glory of that unique vista, but over the years the obstacle had shifted away to allow the waterfall to regain its former majesty.

Visitors could view the waterfall from a platform above or take an elevator down for a more up-close experience.

Most of the gawkers appeared to be tourists. Naoe took the elevator to the lower platform alone while Maiko, who evidently didn't have the stomach to join him, remained on the upper level.

The body had been pulled from the water and lay beneath a vinyl sheet. According to the witnesses, the man appeared to have 'fallen' rather than 'jumped.' He had struck the cliff face several times on the way down.

Naoe considered the waterfall again. Yes, there was something different

about the force of it, now that he was standing this close. The majesty of the falls' thunderous roar and sheeting spray was as it had ever been, and yet...

Here the sense of wrongness was stronger than ever, and the source of it was the earth-energy of the waterfall and the land around it. It had once been charged with both [Kegon Falls](#) ' own solemn 'energy' and the gathering of the countless unpurified spirits of those who had leapt to their deaths here, creating a uniquely turbid earth-energy that was both wrong and right. In fact, waterfalls by their nature tended to attract spirits. One might even say that that eerie, chaotic energy was in itself the aura of holiness.

But here...

This waterfall had none of that 'eeriness' now. No, its own sense of vast splendor was unchanged. But something was missing. Wholly absent.

(It's the 'turbidity' that's missing...)

"The spiritual majesty of the falls has been completely shattered, hasn't it?" a voice he recognized abruptly addressed him, and he turned to see its owner, a young man wearing sunglasses, standing behind him. He had come up to Naoe undetected and now regarded the waterfall with similar thoughtfulness.

"*You* again..." Naoe groaned. "You're about the last person I want to see, Kousaka."

"Hah." Smiling faintly, Kousaka Danjou removed his sunglasses and approached. "I keep running into you in the oddest places, Naoe. Guess you could call it providence?"

"..."

Naoe eyed him warily, waiting. Kousaka drew abreast of him, still gazing at the famed waterfall.

"Kegon Falls isn't much to behold with its spiritual majesty so low."

"What are you doing here? What is Takeda plotting now?" Naoe demanded coldly, and Kousaka glanced at him.

"I have no obligation to give information like that to an enemy. Why don't you tell me why you're here? Do the Uesugi have so much time on their hands that they are now touring waterfalls?"

"..."

Naoe's mouth tightened. His only response was a cold, stony glare.

Kousaka's smile vanished at Naoe's unusual antagonism, and his gaze shifted back to the waterfall.

"This is the first time I've seen Kegon Falls 'splendor so dimmed. You would think that without its impure 'energies,' the aura of holiness would increase and add to its impact, but... Maybe it's just not interesting without them."

"The loss of the unpurified spirits has lessened the spiritual majesty of the waterfall, it seems."

"Exactly. The swarms of unpurified spirits that once amassed here have completely disappeared. ...Well, I suppose you could say that a spiritual majesty sustained by unpurified spirits is in itself an aberration."

"...What is the cause?" Naoe asked guardedly, eyes flashing. "Do you know where these spirits have gone? They couldn't all have passed on."

It was not an easy matter to purify the spirits of those who committed suicide due to the unnatural manner of their deaths. To have done so for so many in such a short time was nigh impossible.

Kousaka glanced up at Naoe. "...I guess you haven't noticed, then."

"Noticed what?"

"—The Crimson Beast..."

Naoe glared at Kousaka, eyes narrowing. "Crimson...Beast...?"

"That corpse over there. The man didn't throw himself into the waterfall—his soul was devoured by the Crimson Beast. Judging by where he collapsed, I'd say it probably dragged his soul into the waterfall basin."

"His soul was...eaten?" Naoe regarded Kousaka dubiously. "What do you mean? Just what is this Crimson Beast?"

"You would've seen it too, if you'd been here." Kousaka crossed his

arms, turning his gaze to the waterfall basin. "It's a malignant spirit-beast that's been wandering this area. Ordinary people can't see it. The ones that do...become its dinner—as the man who died probably did. When I saw it earlier, it looked like a long-tailed lion surrounded by a red aura. A crimson beast which looks like a lion and eats human souls. Which means it's most likely—"

"...The tsutsuga." Naoe muttered, suddenly recalling that Shinya had spoken of a 'crimson beast' in Eri's dream. Is this what he had meant?"

The tsutsuga, like the kirin and the dragon, was a type of spirit-beast. Though most spirit beasts—holy beasts with spiritual powers—were not actually animals, the enigmatic tsutsuga was; it was said to be a ferocious and malevolent animal which existed in spirit form and devoured the souls of people, tigers, and leopards.

(Incidentally, this beast appears to be at the root of the phrase 'tsutsuganashi'—'in good health,' or literally 'without tsutsuga'.)

If what Kousaka had told him was true, then the 'crimson beast' Shinya had spoken of must be the tsutsuga. Which meant that it must also have been what pulled Shinya's soul out of his body?

"Then the missing unpurified spirits of [Kegon Falls](#) must have been devoured by the tsutsuga as well?"

"Hmm. The Falls must be a rich feeding ground. I've heard that there have been a lot of accidents around here; the victims must also have become the tsutsuga's prey. The police wouldn't even know where to

start. Add [Toushou Shrine](#) to the equation, and the local police are probably running around going out of their minds."

"[Toushou Shrine](#) ? You're referring to the theft of the sacred mirror?"

Kousaka's eyes widened in evident surprise. "Huh, so you knew that much."

"I had heard that a sacred mirror called the 'secret treasure of Ieyasu' was at [Toushou Shrine](#) .

I guessed that it was the mirror that was stolen. Is that why you're in Nikkou? Was it the Takeda who stole the sacred mirror?"

"Are you going to lay the blame on innocent people now, Naoe? Don't be ridiculous. We would never stoop to theft." Kousaka's expression turned serious. "It was the soul-sealing mirror called the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' that was stolen."

"What?" Naoe demanded. Kousaka turned his back to the waterfall and leaned against the railing.

"Legend has it that it's a demon mirror which sucks in the soul of anyone reflected within, trapping and sealing it as if it were devouring it. That's why it was named the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) .' The mirror is actually made up of a male and female pair, and one of them was the secret treasure of [Toushou Shrine](#) , enshrined within its inner sanctuary and kept under strict guard."

"So you're saying it was stolen from the inner sanctuary? Where only the priesthood would normally be able to enter?"

"Indeed. My guess is it was at the request of the shrine that the

police announcement was so vague. If the shameful violation of its most sacred sanctum were widely known, even the holy power of the shrine avatars would be affected. It was no ordinary mirror that was taken after all, but the 'secret treasure of the holy avatars.' It is a grave dishonor towards Lord Ieyasu."

"Is it not odd that the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' was the only object taken? No one outside the shrine should have known of its existence—or even inside, unless it was the head priest. So how...?"

"True. But if anyone on the outside did know, it would be—" Kousaka's eyes glinted sharply. "...someone who knew of the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' becoming 'Ieyasu's secret treasure' firsthand..."

Naoe's head lifted sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Did you think the theft of the Tsutsuga Mirror and the activity of the spirit-beast were coincidental, Naoe?"

"...Are you saying the onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> instigated this?"

"I can't say for certain—only that the possibility is high," Kousaka stated, and headed for the elevator. "If you want to get to the bottom of this, I'd suggest making Tōshō Shrine your first stop, Naoe. I bet you'll see something interesting there."

"And what would that be?"

Ignoring him, Kousaka got into the elevator. Naoe followed on his heels. The door of the large 30-person elevator closed, and it began to

climb.

Maiko was waiting on the upper platform.

"Tachibana-san! Have you learned anything?" she asked, running up to him before noticing the handsome young at his side.

Kousaka looked at her and remarked to Naoe maliciously, "Well, well. So you're with a woman today. How unusual. And how is the master you're always dragging along by your leash?"

"What?" Maiko asked, looking at them oddly. Naoe displayed no reaction. He gave Kousaka a single cold glance, his expression chill rather than calm. Kousaka smirked and said in a low voice, "So you didn't bring Kagetora with you"

"..."

"Kagetora left Toyama by himself didn't he? What happened? Did you scare him off with your filthy desires?"

Even those words, which would normally have left Naoe pale and agitated, made no dent in his steely expressionless mask. He merely returned Kousaka's gaze with stony disdain. If that glare had been aimed at the innocent Maiko, it would have left her frozen and rooted to the spot.

Kousaka, too, seemed to perceive the difference in him. All trace of frivolity disappeared from his manner, and his expression turned serious.

"What happened, Naoe?"

"..."

Naoe turned his back on Kousaka and walked toward Maiko.

"Shall we go, Asaoka-san?"

"Is he...an acquaintance of yours?"

"An old friend." Naoe responded, heading for the parking lot. Kousaka took another look at Maiko's bewildered features, and recognition dawned on his face.

"Tachibana-san!" As Maiko moved to catch up to Naoe, Kousaka grabbed her arm from behind. She turned, startled, and he stared down at her with an impregnable expression.

"E-excuse me, what..."

"... Heh... So that's what this is about," Kousaka muttered to himself, before calling in a louder voice to Naoe's back: "Know where you're heading to next, Naoe?"

"...?"

Naoe turned. Kousaka told him, "You should take this young woman to [Futarasan Shrine](#) . You'll see something interesting there as well. So interesting you'll fall right over."

"What?"

"I'll even guide you," Kousaka said, leading the way unerringly to Naoe's Windom. He stopped next to the passenger-side door. "Let's go, Uesugi, we don't have all day."

In the end, Kousaka's 'suggestion' meant postponing the [spirit-sensing](#) at the accident site, and they returned to the city district before the gates.

The place Kousaka had brought them to was [Futarasan Shrine](#) , located within the Nikkou mountains next to [Toushou Shrine](#) . The highest peak of the Nikkou Mountain Range, [Mount Nantai](#) (also called Mount Futara) was worshiped as a holy mountain. A rear

shrine had been erected on its summit, a middle shrine on the banks of [Lake Chuuzenji](#) , and this shrine, the main shrine, within the mountain itself. Due to its fame, [Toushou Shrine](#) was now thought of as the heart of the mountain, but in reality that honor belonged to [Futarasan Shrine](#) .

And it was to [Futarasan Shrine](#) that Kousaka had brought them. Naoe didn't know what that 'something

interesting' Kousaka wanted to show him was, but arriving at the shrine, he was forced to acknowledge that Kousaka had good reason for the visit.

A crowd had gathered at the shrine around its sacred cedar trees. A pair of the ancient, luxuriant giants had grown from a single root, and were lovingly named the husband-and-wife or parent-and-child trees. Next to them was a somewhat younger cedar, and fences encircling the

roots of all three kept visitors at a distance. On a normal day, tourists heard about the trees but didn't get to see them. That was not the case today.

Everyone was gazing at the rightmost tree.

The sight of it stunned Maiko. Naoe took in a quick breath.

In the trunk of the tree, at a height of about 3 meters ^[2], was a human face. Though it seemed merely a deformation of the trunk, the face was too distinct, too vivid.

And it was Shinya's.

It didn't just *look like* Shinya. It hadn't been carved into the trunk's surface; more accurately, it seemed to be jutting out from the trunk, and its features, its shadows, the texture of the skin were all too realistically portrayed.

No one there believed that it could be a naturally-occurring miracle or some kind of coincidence. Everyone was babbling about the wondrous sight, and no-one wanted to leave.

Horror paralyzed Maiko. She remembered this place.

(This is...)



She was standing in the scene from her dreams, and those images were exactly what she gazed upon now. The forest of giant cedars, the three enormous trees. And Shinya with his lower half merged with the rightmost tree.

(Why...)

"It appeared about three days ago, and it's been getting clearer day by day."

"What is going on here?" No miracle, this: it was sacrilege. Naoe fixed a sharp glare at Kousaka. "Why is this happening?"

"How would I know? I only brought you here because I thought this face and the young woman's looked similar. They must be brother and sister or something, right? Guess it has something to do with the tsutsuga, hmm?"

Naoe looked up at Shinya's face in the tree once more. It looked sad somehow.

"Kill the crimson beast."

"Break the mirror."

And the final plea: "Release me from this tree—..."

Naoe and Kousaka understood.

This was not just the bas relief of a face in a tree.

This was Shinya himself. Shinya's missing soul was here in this tree.

Maiko staggered to the cedar, reaching out to touch the trunk. Tears overflowed, and she began to sob. The crowded murmured in puzzled surprise, looking at her in askance.

(Why is his soul in this tree?) Naoe glared grimly into midair. (What is happening here?)

The crimson beast. The mirror—the 'Tsutsuga Mirror'?

If they did kill the one and break the other, what then? At the least, it seemed that Shinya's current state had something to do with both.

Yet how were they all connected...?

"...!"

Kousaka whirled.

"What's wrong?"

"It's here, Naoe."

Naoe followed Kousaka's gaze toward the husband-and-wife cedar. An extremely bizarre 'energy' emanated from that spot.

(That's...!)

A beast with a long curled tail crouched in the cedar's shadow: a spirit beast invisible to the ordinary eye, glowing with red fire. It was perhaps as long as a person was tall and looked like an artist's portrayal of a lion.

Kousaka checked Naoe's sudden movement. The tsutsuga seemed to examine

them from the shadows of the tree for a long moment before turning in a graceful movement and bounding smoothly away. An instant later, it had melted back into the forest.

(... That was...)

He had just come face-to-face with the tsutsuga. He stared after it for a little while, until—

"Is it... Is it mayhap...Naoe-dono...?" a soft male voice asked from one side. Surprised, he turned toward the shrine gate to see a man in his thirties dressed in a business shirt. Naoe recognized the man as he approached. His eyes widened.

"Katakura...dono...?"

The newcomer bowed towards him in greeting, eyes bright with uncommon wisdom as he smiled.

The man that Naoe had thus named was vassal to Oushuu commander Date Masamune and chief retainer of the former Sendai -han — Katakura Kojuouro Kagetsuna .

footnotes

- [1] ~324.7 feet
 - [2] ~9.84 feet
-

Chapter 6: Tsutsuga Mirror

It was during the [Sendai](#) curse incident that Naoe had become acquainted with [Katakura Kagetsuna](#) . The Date-Uesugi alliance, which had worked together to bring down [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) , was still fresh in their memories.

"Well well..." Kojuurou remarked as if he had just noticed Kousaka's presence, "...and Kousaka-dono as well. What a surprise to see both Uesugi and Takeda again in such a place."

"..."

There was a hint of wariness and challenge in Kojuurou's manner towards Kousaka. Though the Date had agreed to an alliance with Takeda, Kojuurou was not inclined to trust Kousaka implicitly; there was something too sly and calculating about the master schemer to allow for complete relaxation of one's guard in his company.

"You are both here because of the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' incident, I presume?"

"Then you must be as well, Katakura-dono...?"

"I am here by command of my Lord [Masamune](#) , who has charged me to investigate this matter. This is, after all, the holy resting place of Lord Ieyasu, the only neutral zone in the [Kantou](#) . In his previous life, my lord was lieutenant to the Shogunate—the one to whom Lord Ieyasu himself entrusted care of this country—so he could hardly turn a blind eye to any incident that might involve the Shogun."

Kojuurou's intelligent gaze dipped to the ground for a moment before focusing on the sacred trees. "This young lady appears to be related to the soul housed in that tree."

"...His elder sister. Her brother was involved in an accident and has been unconscious since, but it was only after performing a spirit-sensing on him that we discovered that his soul has left his body. From the messages he sent to her and his girlfriend, we know that a spirit-beast we believe to be the tsutsuga has something to do with it, but..." Naoe's tone hardened. "Do you know anything of this matter, Katakura-dono? What has caused this? Is there a connection between the tsutsuga and the 'Tsutsuga Mirror'?"

"There is, and not merely an incidental one," Kojuurou answered flatly.

"Naoe-dono, it was likely the work of the tsutsuga that bound this soul to the tree. I would guess that he was engrafted into the cedar after he was devoured."

"What do you mean?"

"The tsutsuga was, I believe, once sealed within the 'Tsutsuga Mirror.' Which means the one who stole the mirror released it from its prison."

"...!"

Naoe and Kousaka stared at him in shock. Kojuurou surveyed their surroundings warily before murmuring in a lowered voice, "We should not

speaking of this matter here. Shall we mayhap seek a more private establishment? The lady—" Kojuurou's gaze went to Maiko—"she is only drawing attention to herself. Let her join us, and I will tell you all of the 'Tsutsuga Mirror'."

They made an odd gathering, the representatives of Date, Takeda, and Uesugi conferring at the knees of the Great and Holy Avatar of Tōshō their company graced by a fair flower of Lake Chuuzenji whose face even now bore the ravages of her weeping.

They were assembled in the tatami room of a tea house near the shrine path. Though Maiko had not the

faintest idea what she had stumbled into, she had followed the one in whom she had placed all her trust, Tachibana Yoshiaki, to this conference with these strange men. For all that they were his acquaintances, there seemed something odd about them, but Maiko's mind

was in such turmoil that she was no longer capable of deep suspicion. She could follow only Naoe's lead like a child.

The faces of the three men were unusually grave.

"The stolen 'Tsutsuga Mirror' was originally a treasure of Futarasan Shrine," the oldest in appearance of the three, the man who looked like a businessman in his thirties, spoke first. "The 'Tsutsuga Mirror'

is made up of a male and female pair, and it is said that the female half has the power to entrap souls; it is also called the

'soul-sealing' mirror. Holy Priest [Shoudou](#) , who founded the first shrines at Nikkou, once sealed two evil tsutsuga causing mischief on [Mt. Nantai](#) into mirrors with his spells—thus the origin of the demon mirrors.

Several hundred years ago, these mirrors were stolen by persons unknown, and their whereabouts became lost—until they resurfaced four hundred years ago."

Naoe and Kousaka both looked up at this.

"Someone was able to mate the two halves of the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' with spells to give birth to a tsutsuga cub."

"A tsutsuga cub..." Naoe repeated in a low voice. "Then the beast we saw earlier..."

"Indeed. The tsutsuga now plaguing Nikkou must verily be the cub born of the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) '

four hundred years ago. Someone used that twisted magic in an attempt to overthrow the Shogunate. It caused uncountable evil in [Edo](#) and threatened [Lord Ieyasu](#) himself. Fearing for his life, Lord Ieyasu commanded his trusted right hand High Priest [Tenkai](#) , abbot of [Rinnou Temple](#) , to exterminate the beast. The story goes that after many clever schemes, High Priest [Tenkai](#) sealed the cub into the female half of the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' with its mother."

"Then the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' stolen several weeks ago..."

"...Was the female of the pair, the 'soul-sealing mirror'. After Lord Ieyasu's death, High Priest [Tenkai](#) enshrined this mirror deep in the inner sanctuary of the main temple of [Toushou Shrine](#) according to his lord's will."

Naoe and Kousaka looked at each other, and Kousaka leaned forward to ask, "Then the thief who stole it from [Toushou Shrine](#) took it in order to

release the tsutsuga?"

"Such would be my assumption. But to release a soul sealed in the mirror, the other '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#)'—the male half—is needed."

"How...?"

"Legend has it that if the female mirror bearing the sealed soul is matched with the male '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ,' the soul will be released.

"Where is this mirror now?"

"I heard that it was once kept at the [Toushou Shrine](#) at Mt. Kunou , but it is no longer there. After the many thefts there, it was judged

that Mt. Kunou was no longer safe, and the mirror was moved to other locations. I am investigating its current whereabouts." Kojuurou's eyes flashed. "It is said that records at [Hakone Shrine](#) list a similar mirror in its keeping."

"Hakone..." Naoe muttered, brows furrowing. "Which means we should assume the thief already has the male half in his possession. However, I do not believe I have heard of such an object being stolen from [Hakone Shrine](#) ..."

"Perhaps the theft was not noticed, or occurred too many years ago. I wonder... That the female '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' was concealed at [Toushou Shrine](#) was itself an absolute secret. Even officials of the Shogunate had no knowledge of it."

"Hmm. Then how is it that the Date knew?"

"Lord Ieyasu placed deep trust in my lord and bestowed upon him the

title of Second-in-Command of the Shogunate." Kojuurou's eyes glittered with pride. "He gave this secret into my lord's keeping, just as he entrusted him with the safekeeping of the future of this country. Such is my belief."

"..."

The obvious pride on Kojuurou's face as he spoke dazzled Naoe for a moment, and he wondered if he appeared thus to others when he spoke of

his own lord. —For a moment, *his* face threatened to surface in Naoe's mind, and he hurriedly shoved it away.

"The problem, then, is the thief's intentions," Kousaka murmured, a long finger placed thoughtfully on his chin. "Why has he released the tsutsuga from the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#)'? Why bind a soul into the sacred tree at [Futarasan Shrine](#)? How did he know of the tsutsuga's existence in the first place?"

"..."

"The thief you spoke of earlier, who took the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#)' to produce the tsutsuga cub—could there be a connection between the two, Katakura-dono?"

"'Tis certainly worthy of consideration. The question may even be if they are the selfsame person. If so, then it would be no surprise that he knew of its existence."

"An [onshou](#)?" Naoe's question stirred conjecture in both men, and silence fell for a moment.

"Who was the thief four hundred years ago?"

"Only High Priest [Tenkai](#) knew for certain, but rumors indicated the Fuuma.

"Fuuma?!" Naoe exclaimed. "The Fuuma Clan? The ninja clan from [Sagami](#) ?"

"There is no definitive proof, but you too must recall how at the time, those masterless samurai of Toyotomi who desired the fall of the Shogunate formed an alliance with the remnants of the Fuuma to bring chaos to Edo. The tsutsuga cub was said to be a part of that scheme. I could certainly believe that the Fuuma Clan, who are rumored to be adept both at the art of illusion and high [Mikkyou](#) sorcery, are capable of having produced the cub. And, too—" Kojuurou

added in a lower tone, "with the skills the Fuuma has at its disposal, finding the location of the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) '

pair could not have been too difficult. After all, spycraft lies at the heart of the ninja arts. Or perhaps they were in possession of the knowledge all along. If they have returned to the present age with the intention of utilizing the mirrors..."

"Then it was also the Fuuma who stole the female '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ' from [Toushou Shrine](#) and released the tsutsuga cub...?"

"It is very possible..."

The three men fell silent. Only Maiko, struggling to make sense of the improbable conversation, continued to look bewildered. Seated beside her, Naoe gave her a sidelong glance and asked, "What of Shinya-san?"

What purpose could the tree-binding serve, Katakura-dono? Do you have
any insight into this?"

"Not at present, I'm afraid. However, the male tsutsuga eats fire and exhales fire instead of air. The 'soul-eating tsutsuga' is generally said to be the female. I have heard that the cub inherited abilities from both its parents, and four hundred years ago it devoured human souls and breathed them out again into cedars and stones. I do not doubt that what is happening now is the work of this creature."

"...Then Shinya was...!" Maiko roused and leaned forward as the conversation centered on her brother. "Why is Shinya reflected in mirrors? If his soul is bound in a tree, why the reflections...?"

"The tree-binding is one of the tsutsuga's abilities, and it is responsible for the soul's imprisonment. However, we are not speaking of an ordinary tsutsuga, but a spirit-beast born from mirrors—in other words, its true form is that of a mirror. Shinya-san is using the tsutsuga's power to send his messages to you through the world within the mirror."

"Oh..." Stunned, Maiko pressed a hand to her mouth as she paled. She pleaded, "Then how can I release my brother? How do I get his soul out of that tree and back into his own body? Please tell me what I need to do! Please!"

"To release him from that tree..." troubled, Kojuurou frowned slightly,

"we must sever the power that is binding him. In other words, we must kill the tsutsuga."

"Kill the...tsutsuga?"

"Yes. But its spiritual nature means that it would likely be impossible for you and extremely difficult for us as well. Which means there is but one way," Kojuurou stated gravely. "We must break the source of the tsutsuga's life force: the 'Tsutsuga Mirror'."

"Break the...'Tsutsuga Mirror'...?"

"Yes. If we should destroy the mirrors, the tsutsuga will lose the foundation of the spiritual power that sustains its life, in which case the tree-binding will dissolve on its own and release your brother."

"But in order to do so," Naoe spoke for Maiko, "The stolen 'Tsutsuga Mirror' must be found."

"Indeed, that is true. We must locate both mirrors. I am almost certain, however, that both will be found in the same place."

In the possession of the thief who had taken the female 'Tsutsuga Mirror' from Tōshō Shrine .

Maiko looked down at the table in despair. Kousaka's eyes glittered.

"Interesting. Then your first order of business is to find the thief. One misstep there, and you will have some serious trouble on your hands."

Maiko paled even further at his words. Naoe interjected, "We're not

even certain of the Fuuma Clan's involvement at this point. In any case, Katakura-dono, we must find the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' and destroy both halves?"

..."... 'Twould be dangerous. Since we do not yet know the true nature of our opponents, we must take great care..."

"I understand," Naoe nodded, and Maiko looked pleadingly at him.

"Tachibana-san!"

"In any case, we must locate the mirrors as quickly as we can. Even with life-support, the body cannot survive without its soul for long.

Let us seek the 'Tsutsuga Mirror.' If we do not return Shinya-san's soul..."

"Let me lend you my aid," Kojuurou offered. "In any event, 'tis plain that an evil scheme has been set in motion. If left unchecked, the tsutsuga will continue to claim more victims. Let us seek out the thief and destroy the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' as soon as we may."

Naoe and Kojuurou exchanged nods of understanding while Kousaka alone looked on...

As they stepped out of the teahouse and headed for the parking lot, Kousaka asked, "Will you go to battle against the Fuuma for that woman, Naoe?"

Naoe's only reaction was a hard stare. He glanced at Maiko and Kojuurou

walking ahead of them and responded, "If this concerns the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, I cannot simply leave it be. I can't allow more innocents to be made victims in this."

"Are you really that much of a softy, or do you just like to meddle?"

You're not going to have a chance in hell against the Fuuma. Are you really going to just throw your life away?"

"Throw...my life away?" Naoe's eyes glittered coldly. "And what if I do? Has it ever been anything more than expendable? Why value something that can be exchanged for another at any time?"

Kousaka's eyes widened in surprise at Naoe's retort. He would never have imagined such words coming from the man walking beside him.

"Naoe...?"

"Let them destroy this husk; I'll simply possess another. We are beasts viler than the tsutsuga. Our depraved existences are beneath that of animals." Though a cool smile twisted Naoe's lips, there was something wild in his tone. "Only fools still believe in virtue and honor."

"What happened?" Kousaka demanded sharply. "What happened between the two of you?"

"..."

The smile and all other expression vanished from Naoe's face. His eyes hardened until he appeared to be looking out of a frozen iron mask.

"Have you cut yourself off from Kagetora?"

"..."

"Are you planning to make an end of it?"

"—Many people..." Naoe's voice was as expressionless as his face—
"...choose death in order to escape pain."

—Suicide...

The word leapt into the air between them.

Naoe fell silent. This was not the despair that had accompanied his bouts of self-torture in the past. Even Kousaka could not tell now which was a mask and which told of Naoe's true feelings.

Kousaka broke the tense silence. "So the one you actually want to kill is...yourself."

"..."

"You're going to let the beast take over?"

"...What is your objective here?" Naoe countered, cutting off Kousaka's questions. "The theft of the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' is the reason you're here in Nikkou as well, isn't it? We've had enough of being moved around like your pawns."

"Hmph. No need to get paranoid. I'm here to deal with the 'soul-sealing Tsutsuga Mirror'."

"What?"

"The Houjou of [Sagami](#) are stirring up trouble with an eye to re-annexing the Takeda

territories." Kousaka's gaze drifted to the line of cedar trees.

"They're moving towards a head-on confrontation with Takeda over the conquest of the [Kantou](#) , and we have detected suspicious activity here in the [Shimotsuke](#) area as well. They have sent <<[nue](#)>> to assassinate my lord. It was also the Houjou <<[nue](#)>> who took down a Takeda vassal tasked with the search for the stolen '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) .'"

"Then you believe that it was the Houjou who stole the mirrors..."

"Houjou's <<[nue](#)>>

do not have the power to destroy my lord. But by using the 'soul-sealing mirror,' they could remove him from the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>."

"..."

Kousaka stopped. "The Houjou are the masters of the Fuuma Clan," he stated plainly, "so their involvement would not surprise me. In any case, the mirrors are too dangerous; our first order of business must be to destroy them. On that point, at least, we are agreed. So how about it? Shall we join forces to do so? I have the [Shimotsuke](#) <<[nue](#)>> at my disposal—I can mobilize them for the search. You need information, don't you? I think such an arrangement would benefit us both."

"...What are you scheming behind everyone's backs this time?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I've laid all my cards on the table this

time. It is far too dangerous to leave the 'soul-sealing mirror' in the hands of someone like the Houjou. You can't deny that."

"..."

"Our first step is to split up and find the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' as soon as possible—unless, of course, you don't really care what happens to the young woman's brother. —So how about it, Naoe?"

Naoe's trust in Kousaka didn't increase by one iota, but time was of the essence. He needed information. If that meant knowingly walking into a trap, then so be it.

(Let him lay his traps.) Naoe's lips tilted in a faint, defiant smile. "...Fine."

He went eagerly to his ending.

The ending of his existence in this world.

For there was nothing else for him but pain—bottomless, inescapable pain. His years on earth had left him with no other conclusion.

He had concealed his intentions by going through the motions of everyday life—when in truth, he had spent his days and sleepless nights charting this path ever since that day he had parted from Kagetora.

He could not merely put an end to his love for Kage-tora, for that love, so like a weapon, was life itself. One could not be snuffed out of existence without the other, so it was his own existence he would end.

He had come to realize that he could not stop this love from returning again and again, for its demise only preceded its resurrection in the form of madness. It soared above his repeated efforts at recompense, stifling his feelings out of existence. Transcended them by such heights that even 'worship' was too pale a word for what Kage-tora had become within him. What else could he call this love but madness when he could no longer see Kage-tora as a living, breathing human being? What was it if not a weapon?

He did not believe in the existence of anything eternally changeless.

There was nothing in the realm of men that did not change—that lesson had been driven home to him more times than he could count in the past four hundred years. To accept something, to possess something, was the first step to losing it. He knew that so very well.

There was no way to shake off the pain but to live in the moment.

If he must lose, then better not to have had it be his at all. If he could not tear himself away, then he saw no way out but to tear himself apart. The 'mission' no longer mattered. He wanted to destroy the <<Yami-Sengoku >> only in order to destroy himself. He no longer needed a just cause. What he did, he did for himself.

It was natural for what was no longer a man to feel pain in its attempt to live as a man.

A beast's agony mattered to no-one...

Even the buddhas would not come to save him.

Yes—only now he knew it.

"Naoe-dono."

The sound of his name called him out of his thoughts. In the passenger seat, Katakura Kojuurou was giving him an odd look.

"Is something the matter?"

"No..."

They were winding up the curves of [Iroha Hill](#) again to take Maiko home. Kojuurou's voice had broken a silence that

had descended as soon as Naoe had gotten behind the wheel. "It's nothing," Naoe shook his head, glancing at a haggard Maiko sitting with shoulders hunched in the rearview mirror.

"You must be tired, Asaoka-san."

"Oh...I'm...okay."

"I understand that you are worried about your brother, but everything will be all right. I promise you that we will find the mirrors."

"Tachibana-san, please...please take me with you!" Maiko pleaded. "I want to help with the search. To help my brother. I can't just...just sit back and do nothing! It'll drive me crazy! So please let me go with you!"

Naoe scowled at the road, mouth tightening. Kojuurou turned and gently answered in his place.

"Asaoka-san, please do not pursue this any further. Those we are facing have the power to control a spirit-beast. If you continue to involve yourself, you will only put yourself in harm's way."

"But I can't do nothing but wait! If something happens to my brother, I'll never be able to forgive myself. If we can't return his soul in time, if his body dies before then...!" Maiko begged, clinging to the back of Naoe's seat. "Please take me with you, Tachibana-san!"

"...You still don't get it, do you?" Naoe said, eyes not moving from the road. "It's not your safety I'm concerned about."

"What?"

"Bringing along someone who can't even protect herself only puts us in greater danger. Am I speaking plainly enough for you? You apparently expect us to keep you safe, but I see no point in increasing the risk to ourselves by bringing someone who can contribute nothing. Of course things would be different if you offered anything worth protecting."

"...!"

"Let me put it baldly: you are a burden."

Maiko stiffened, stunned into silence. She had never in a million years imagined that Tachibana would speak thus to her.

Kojuurou added more sympathetically, "I understand your need to help your brother, but please put your faith in us. Go home."

"..."

But Maiko never even heard the words. Her eyes suddenly overflowed with tears as she sat with her fists clenched on her knees.

(Why...?)

Tears flowed down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop them. The shock of those cold, cold words against her battered emotions was too much, and though she was not a delicate maiden to burst into tears at a harsh rebuke—would, in fact, have retorted an indignant rebuttal had it been anyone else—those sentiments coming from Tachibana...

(Why...?)

Her chest ached, and the tears refused to stop. Even she couldn't understand this pain, this sharp sorrow, as she continued to cry, hands coming up to hide her face.

Naoe drove on with Maiko sobbing behind him, no change discernible in his expression. The Windom wound up Iroha Hill's twists and turns.

"...?"

A large shadow crossed into the rearview mirror behind Maiko for a split second.

(What was that?)

"Naoe-dono!" Kojuurou's exclamation jerked Naoe's gaze reflexively back to the road ahead. Just as a red shadow blinked into existence in front of the windshield.

"Waugh!"

He stepped hard on the breaks, wrenching the car to one side. The Windom's rear wheel skipped to a stop inches from the guardrail. A red lion that looked like it had leapt out of an artist's fanciful painting stood in the center of the road, predator's gaze fixed on them like a hunter marking its prey.

"Naoe-dono, that is—!"

A spirit-beast glowing with red fire.



(The tsutsuga...?!)

The Crimson Beast took a flying leap toward them. Naoe immediately pressed down on the accelerator, and the Windom burst forward. Enraged, the beast twisted and sprang after the car with supernatural quickness as it charged past.

"Naoe-dono! It's coming after us!"

"It's catching up!"

Naoe kept his foot on the accelerator, propelling the Windom to reckless speeds on Iroha Hill's hairpin curves. But Iroha being what it was, there was a limit to how

far he dared push the car. The tsutsuga followed relentlessly. It finally caught up with them at the 'nu' (ぬ) curve, landing with a

flying leap on the hood.

"Get down!"

The Windom screeched to a stop, its entire body shuddering. Tiny fractures appeared in the front windshield with crackling sounds.

"Katakura-dono! Please take care of Asaoka-san!"

"Don't look into the tsutsuga's eyes—that's how it devours souls!"

Naoe opened the door and rolled onto the road. The tsutsuga was off the car and bounding toward him faster than the eye could follow. It swerved left and right as it came, foiling Naoe's aim. His <<nenpa >> missed the beast completely.

The tsutsuga's eyes glowed gold.

Don't look!

"Guh...!"

He closed his eyes, fighting the pull of its power. The tsutsuga's claws grazed across his arm. As he rolled, the beast turned and leapt at him again.

"Uwaugh...!"

It was on him before he could twist away, baring its fangs in a howl like the screech of metal scraping against metal as it sank its claws into his shoulder.

"Aaaaagh...!" the pain tore a moan from him just as another car came up the hill. The driver slammed on the breaks in surprise, and the tsutsuga spun and flew towards him.

"No!" A <<nenpa >>

fueled with all his remaining strength accompanied the defiant cry and hit the tsutsuga squarely. It flung the beast to the asphalt with a yowl, where it lay writhing. Naoe shot another <<nenpa >> at it. The tsutsuga whimpered like a dog as it turned and ran, leaping over the guardrail and disappearing in midair as it fell.

"Naoe-dono!"

Kojuurou and Maiko climbed out of the car and ran to Naoe's side.

Seeing the fresh blood staining his shoulder, Maiko gasped,

"Tachibana-san! Are you all right?!"

Panting, Naoe lifted a hand to his right shoulder. Blood instantly covered his palm. Teeth clenched, he commented, "...Looks like they've noticed we're here."

"So it would seem." Kojuurou responded grimly, looking in the direction the tsutsuga had disappeared. "There seems little doubt that someone is controlling it. Things will be harder from now on. But first we must take care of your wounds, Naoe-dono. Perhaps we should call a taxi..."

"It's all right, I can still drive." He noticed then that Maiko was crying again, weakly, at his side. His lips lifted wryly.

"Please don't cry. I don't think my health can take any more tears."

"Tachibana-san..."

"Whoever makes you cry must be cursed by an instant karmaic backlash."

Naoe managed a smile despite the pain. "Could you take me to the hospital?"

Chapter 7: Wings

Utterly unaware of the events that had engulfed Naoe in [Nikkou](#) , Takaya had spent most of the night wandering the streets of [Kabuki Town](#) .

As the ornamented darkness gave way to the dawn of a tawdry reality in [Shinjuku](#) , the 'Nightless City,' Takaya awoke in a spacious hotel room.

His last memory had been of getting into a one-sided fight in [Kabuki Town](#) . Disoriented from sleep, he was disoriented even further to find himself in an unfamiliar place. He sat up abruptly on the bed.

—And moaned involuntarily at the pain lancing through his body.

"Owww..."

The students using him as a punching bag had certainly left him a few marks to remember them by. Takaya looked dazedly around the room as

he waited for the worst of the aching to subside.

(Where the hell am I...?)

"You're awake."

The man from last night rose from his seat at the window. Though it was not yet fully light outside, he could see the [Meiji Jinguu](#) forests as dawn suffused the far horizon with a purple glow. He finally

realized that he was in a hotel room—a room in one of the upper-class hotels in western [Shinjuku](#) , in fact. Takaya blinked.

"Are you sober now?"

"Huh? ...um, yeah..."

The man must have brought him here. He looked younger in the bright room than beneath the dim light of the streetlights. He reminded Takaya of the kind of actor who was typically cast in detective dramas, but somehow gentler.

"You must be thirsty. Let me see if there's any water."

"..."

His watch told him that it was almost five. This man had found him beaten to a pulp on the roadside and brought him here. The briefcase he had been carrying was now on the bed, and Takaya suddenly noticed that the trampled cigarette box had been placed beside his pillow.

"It's something you cherish, isn't it?" The man remarked, reading his thoughts. "You should cut back on the smoking, though. It's not good for you."

"Who..."

"Come take a look? There's mineral water in the fridge. Would you like one?"

Takaya climbed out of bed. The next room turned out to be the living room. Even if the lavish interior design hadn't convinced him of the likely expense of these rooms, the unearthly view from the windows

would have. The man was seated on the sofa, extracting the cork from a bottle of mineral water.

"...Is something the matter?"

"Ah...no..." The man's question jolted Takaya out of his frozen reverie, and he scratched his head embarrassedly. "I was just thinking that I...um...must've given you a lot of trouble..."

"Don't worry about it," the man responded, giving him a good-natured smile. "I only brought you here because I wanted to. You weren't planning to go home last night anyway, right?"

"..."

The man gazed at the silent Takaya for a moment before asking, "Who do those cigarettes belong to? A friend?"

"Friend..." Takaya murmured before smiling bitterly and shaking his head. "No. Not a friend."

"Then...what?"

He turned the question over in his mind. Yes, what? What was he to Takaya?

(My...vassal...?)

That was certainly one answer—an answer for the part of him that was 'Kagetora,' perhaps. But what of Ougi Takaya? What was he then?

As Takaya stood there thinking, unable to come up with an answer, the

man touched the heart of the question: "But it's someone very important to you?"

"Important?" Takaya repeated, startled. "Why should I give a damn about somebody like that? He could disappear tomorrow and I wouldn't even notice. It's not like I asked him to keep following me around—"

"..."

"...he's just using me anyway..." Takaya trailed off, eyes darkened with emotion falling to the floor. The man studied him carefully, but Takaya was silent, lost in his thoughts. After a moment, he suddenly smiled. "That's right, I am just being used, aren't I? They saw something that gave them an advantage and they took it."

The man eyed Takaya oddly as his shoulders shook with laughter and set the bottle in his hand down on the table.

"What is it?"

"I just felt really stupid all of a sudden. It's not like me thinking about it is going to change anything, is it? There's really no point in thinking about it at all."

"..."

"I actually thought he needed me, but the one he needs isn't me. It's Kagetora. Everything he said, everything he did, that was all for Kagetora. He just wants me to be a substitute for Kagetora. I am such a fucking moron. I can't believe I've been so stupid, it fucking pisses

me off."

Maybe he wasn't as sober as he'd thought. The words kept pouring out, and he couldn't seem to get his feelings under control.

Tear drew glistening trails down Takaya's face beneath the hand that hid his eyes. Tears from laughter? the man wondered. Or from something else? Takaya continued to shake with mirth.

"I get it now. I'm just a substitute. Aren't I? I think I always knew it. I've been worrying over nothing all this time. It was all just me...all in my head." The tears were overtaking the laughter in his voice.

"I am such a fucking *kid*."

"..."

"He was protecting 'Kagetora,' and I knew it, but I wanted to believe he was doing it for me. When he was kind, when he trusted me, that was all for 'Kagetora.' I only pretended it was me because I'm a conceited idiot. I'm so stupid. I'm just a hopeless little punk! I start thinking I'm all that as soon as somebody indulges me a little... That's why...!" Bitterness filled his voice. "—I never should have let myself think it was anything else! Why did he have to be so desperate to protect me? Why did he have to be so kind? Why did he have to look at me like that? It made me think... it made me think... But none of it was for me..."

The man gazed at him in silence. Takaya panted for breath, shoulders shaking as he tried to calm himself, before slumping down on the sofa.

"Who are you speaking of?"

"..."

"The owner of these cigarettes?"

Takaya smiled tiredly at the question. "They only smell like him."

"How do you know?"

"..."

Takaya's face darkened in self-scorn, and he laughed again bitterly.

"I'm such a kid that I start having all these stupid hopes as soon as somebody turns to look at me. I should've just left it alone, but I had to go and think, 'Maybe I can trust him. Maybe it'll be all right to open up to him...' Like an moron, I started messing my head up with all these useless thoughts. I was constantly terrified that he might throw me away... The truth is..."

"..."

"Why does he have to be so different?" Takaya closed his eyes. "Why did he have to go and get all torn up protecting a kid who's got nothing to give him? He was hiding all of that pain... He would've done anything to protect me, and it scared me. So I put up walls between us, I pushed him away, but he..."

"..."

"No matter how hard I pushed, he wouldn't leave. Anyone else would've just given up, but not him. He always came back. He was always there. And that terrified me, because I started to think that maybe he'll stay. Maybe I can trust him to guard my back. I could never trust anybody, always had to look for enemies from every direction, but it wears you down, you know?"

"..."

"I started to hope that maybe with him at my back I wouldn't have to be on my guard all the time...but at the same time it scared me so much—not of betrayal or being shot in the back..."

Takaya's gaze fixed on the window. "It wasn't betrayal that I was afraid of. Because if he wanted to cut me down from behind, I would've been all right with that. I'm not trying to sound like a tough guy or anything. It's just that if he was going to throw me away anyway, then betrayal wouldn't have mattered..."

"..."

The man gave no indication of agreement, only listened quietly as Takaya spoke. Takaya laughed again.

"It was enough for me just to have somebody there at my back... But he's such a fool that he wanted to protect me from everything."

"From...everything?"

"Yeah. All of me, from everything. Not like a shield, but..."

He saw the familiar face in his mind's eye.

"...like wings. Gigantic bird's wings. Enfolding me like...'here is safety.' No matter where I was, being inside those wings meant that nothing could hurt me. Like they were telling me, 'you'll never be cold again.' But I'm just a gutless punk, just a kid who can't stop wanting it all, and as soon as I felt that warmth I wanted to be inside it always... Because it's something I never had, so like an idiot I..."

Longed for it...

For the one who had appeared in his life offering it with both hands.

The one he never wanted to leave. Never wanted to lose. Selfish as it was, arrogant as it was, he no longer knew how to live without it. That was why...!

"I can't go forward, and I can't go back! How could I have gotten this weak? Just because I had him there to protect me! I'm so afraid of being abandoned, of him vanishing...! No matter what he does to me, no matter what his reasons are, I can't let him go!"

Takaya shook, teeth gritted and fists clenched, unable now to hold back the wild outpouring of words and emotions.

"I can't understand him. He won't tell me anything... How the hell was I supposed to react, when I don't understand anything? All I saw was

his pain and his suffering, and all I knew was that it was because of me...!"

Tears blurred his vision. He scowled fiercely, pressing his hands hard against his eyes, trying to hold them back. His chest felt pierced through by the arrow-sharp memories of that day, by the look in Naoe's eyes, full of accusation and hatred for a Takaya who could not understand his pain. Who could not understand the heart of a man whose own tears had drawn glistening trails down his cheeks as he pressed all his stifled, violent emotions into Takaya's lips, breathed them into his mouth.

Why couldn't he understand?

Who was Takaya to him?

What was it he'd been trying to make Takaya understand?

"...What do you want from me?" he asked the memory of Naoe, opening his eyes. "What was it you wanted me to do?"

"Hey..."

The man, sensing the strange shift in Takaya and realizing suddenly that Takaya was no longer speaking to him, half-stood.

"The things you said, the things you did, how was I supposed to respond? What did you want from me? What were you asking me for? Why do you hate me?!"

"Hey, what's—"

"What did I do to make you hate me?! I—no, it was never me, was it?!
'Kagetora' is the one you see, never me. I'm just a substitute for him,
aren't I? It's all conceit, it's all arrogance, whatever I do! I'm
always the one flailing about! Nothing I do matters!"

"Hey...!"

"I don't get you! Why won't you just tell me instead of holding it all
in? I don't get anything! I can't...damn it! Damn all of this!"

The man shook Takaya lightly, and Takaya clutched at his arms, mind still
caught in the turbulence of his emotions.

—How he needed something to cling to!

"...What should I do...?!"

He grasped at the arms around him with all his might, desperately
trying to restrain his emotions as they shot from one violent extreme
to the other. Desperately looking for an answer.

"What...should I..."

"..."

The man held Takaya's trembling shoulders, gazing at him silently as he
sobbed. After a long moment, he finally answered calmly, "Keep
thinking... Keep looking for your answers. You'll find them."

"..."

"He...is there for you. Just as you are there for him. Believe that you will not turn from each other, and keep thinking. Keep reaching for your answers. Don't look away."

Takaya's head lifted. The man gazed at him and into him, deeper than anyone ever had before.

"Whatever he is seeking, it is encompassed within your existence. I believe the fact that you are here means everything to him."

"..."

The man nodded quietly and smiled as Takaya met his gaze, face still wet with the tracks of his tears. Takaya closed his eyes once more, shutting the pain back in his chest as he murmured a name in silent longing.

(Naoe...)

I will be by your side. Always.

Yet he was not. He had left Takaya behind.

(Liar...)

At rush hour, [Shinjuku](#) 's almost tangible energy focused and accelerated to an even higher

intensity. To Takaya, gazing at the crowds of commuters being disgorged

by the underground passage's western exit, this was the truest face of Shinjuku .

Ah, of course. Today was September 1st, which meant he was already missing the opening ceremony for the second semester. If he was skipping school from the get-go, the rest of the year didn't bear thinking about, Takaya thought as he drained his coffee.

"So. Where to next?" The man seated across the table asked guilelessly. He had reserved a table for them in the lounge for breakfast, and apparently was not inclined to let Takaya return home just yet. Yet his grin was so good-natured that Takaya felt all his wariness vanish.



The man was a mystery, and not just for the fact of his unknown identity. That Takaya, normally so violently distrustful of strangers, could open up to him was in itself extraordinary... or perhaps not

'open up,' precisely. It was as if this man had the rare gift of understanding the hearts of others so completely that it made their natural reserve superfluous.

"We have lots of time. Is there anywhere you would like to go?"

Takaya laughed. True, even if he started back for [Matsumoto](#) right that minute, he probably wouldn't make roll-call. "Let's see..."

he rested his chin on his hands and gazed out at the hot city morning.

"What's around here...?"

The famous places of Tokyo flashed through his head. But it wasn't as if he was a tourist from the countryside, and the usual attractions, like Tokyo Tower and the bus tours, didn't quite seem to fit the bill.

And besides, what the heck was he doing here anyway? Doubt assailed him

for a moment before he shoved it recklessly aside.

"I can't really think of anything... Maybe just wander around for a bit?"

"Then let's wander." The man seemed willing to tag along, though Takaya couldn't guess at his intentions—or even his name. Didn't an adult like him have anywhere to be rather than knock about town with a kid?

"How about we go sightsee the historical landmarks around here?"

"Historical landmarks?" Takaya asked incredulously.

The man nodded, a smile lighting his eyes. Takaya realized that it was that boyish grin set in a face with enough years to have crows' feet

that made him so personable.

"It'll be fun! We can go on a tour of the old Edo landmarks."

"Fun? You call going on a social studies field trip fun?"

"You're missing the point," the man sighed in the theatrically exaggerated manner of a bossy child. "All those Edo towns you see in historical dramas? They all existed right here once

upon a time! Come on, I know you must be a little curious. Wouldn't it be fun to visit the actual sites of all those places you see in Chuushingura or Ooka Echizen ?" The man peered at Takaya expectantly.

In actuality, Takaya hadn't seen that many historical dramas. What was the point when they were all alike, anyway? Still, he had to admit he was a bit curious about what the megalopolis had been like in the old days. The man's expression put him in mind of a father who had taken the rare day off so he could take his kids on an outing. Why is he even putting this much effort into trying to get me to go along? Takaya wondered, but the amiability he felt for the man made it impossible to refuse him. He gave in with a wry, half-disgusted smile, no longer even able to care about his identity.

"All right, all right already! I'll come with you wherever!"

Takaya was a bit surprised to find that the man drove a Pajero. It wasn't that the car didn't suit him, exactly—just that it wasn't a car

one usually saw in the city. But riding in it, Takaya thought it was rather cool. Tokyo was filled with cars at the best of times, but most people drove flat passenger models; it was nice to be able to ride above it all in the taller Pajero.

They drove through Oote Town along the moat of the Imperial Palace with the forest on their right.

"We can take our time," the man murmured, relaxed. He truly seemed to be in no hurry—or rather, he was, for whatever reason, making time for Takaya.

"I believe Edo Castle 's tower was around here. It was gigantic—you could see it from anywhere in Edo ."

"It got burned down, didn't it? They couldn't rebuild it because there wasn't enough money..."

"So I heard. A daimyo 's

castle was a symbol of his power. Many of Japan's modern cities grew out of old castle-towns. If you think about it in that light, then you have to conclude that the Edo Period formed the foundation for modern Japan."

"Are you like a teacher or something?"

The man's only response was a smile—a smile containing a trace of irony, Takaya saw.

"...One cannot refute that those who live through an era best know the truth of it. But perhaps only those who come after can teach its

meaning."

"Wh...?"

"Yet only knowing what value there is to living for the sake of living...is meaningless."

Takaya peered questioningly at the man in profile, and the man glanced back at him.

"Do you like history?"

"Huh...?" the suddenness of the question left him floundering. "Um, like...? It's a pain having to remember the names of all the eras, and it kinda feels like the people who write all that stuff in textbooks don't really believe it was all real," Takaya replied, then added flatly, "But I do know that I hate the [Sengoku Period](#) ."

"Hmm? Why is that?"

The answer was obvious, of course. Because it was...*too* real.

But after meeting Naoe and all the other warlords, he could certainly feel the connection between the events of the distant past described in his textbooks and the modern era in which he lived. If only he didn't have to confront that past...

Takaya sighed lightly. "The people who lived back then were all insane. Totally bonkers."

"Is that right? So none of the [Sengoku](#) generals were in their right minds?"

"Yeah."

"That sounds unlikely, but you're probably right. Perhaps the power to change an era is really the sum of a tiny piece of everyone's insanity."

"So 'insanity makes history?'"

"Hmm. Whose words are those?" the man asked admiringly.

"Dunno..."

Takaya propped his chin up in his hand and turned his gaze to the stone wall running along the moat. Where had he heard those words before?
As

he reached back, a strange image suddenly rushed forward from the deep
recesses of his mind.

"Ah...!"

Takaya abruptly stilled. The image was followed by another and another, all coming back to vivid life.

The burnt field had once been a city. Now its people, countless blackened, unrecognizable lumps, littered the crumbling ruins.

The images crashed into Takaya like raging waves driven by a storm-tossed sea, freezing him in place. Yes. It had been that night.
That night out of a nightmare.

The city had been bombarded by a rain of incendiary bombs and hails of machine gun fire. And its people had died. In scarlet flames, in the

blasts of scorching wind hot enough to melt glass. Too many to count as fighter planes stormed the singed night sky. They could do nothing as they slipped past the wounded and dying wailing their agony, their unique powers as wisps of mist in their first taste of the flames of Hell. Even for them, it had taken everything simply to survive.

"Water, oh please...some water for my child..." a woman carrying a child on her back implored. He didn't know what kind of nightmare she had escaped, how far she had come through the raging flames. Her child was dead. The woman's mind shattered the moment she saw the lifeless little body with its head torn off. Her crazed howls faded into the inferno.

The [Sumida River](#) had become a river of fire. Countless people trying to reach water died on its banks.

Everywhere he looked, there was only destruction. Their reality had been replaced by a scene out of Hell.

"Perhaps this country can only be saved if we all go insane..." someone murmured from behind him, embracing him with helpless desperation as he stood dazedly staring...

It had been...

"Is there something wrong?" the man asked with concern. "Penny for your thoughts...?"

Takaya didn't hear him. His memories of that night had come to life in

his mind. Memories of the massive air-strike against Tokyo. Those gruesome scenes repeating themselves over and over again. Takaya clutched at his head, shutting his eyes tightly.

Naoe's voice. Asking how they could have let such tragedy come to pass. Wanting to despise all the world. His heart crumbling, surely, beneath the weight of his hatred for the enemy nations who had wrought such heedless destruction, regret and resentment and helpless rage against the inhumanity and injustice of it. Grief beyond words transforming into madness, into wings encircling him. Standing at the center of Hell, feeling Naoe's tears burn into his shoulder, those arms had healed the unspeakable agony of his soul.

"Let us live, Kagetora-sama."

The words Naoe had moaned into his ear within those flames now echoed there again in crystal clarity. The pure strength and steely determination he heard in them made him want to weep. *Whatever happens, I will never turn from you.*

"No matter what happens, I will survive.

Even if this country's future should be burned to ash in these flames, even if this nation called Japan vanishes forever from the world...

"I will look upon it all with my own eyes. I will live, and I will fix my gaze upon the crumbling path of this poor country and all its mad people," Naoe had said, arms tight around him within the inferno.

Why did he remember everything so clearly? Why had it come back now, so many years later?

"What's wrong?" the man sounded truly concerned. "Are you crying again?"

Biting his lip and shutting his eyes tightly, Takaya shook his head. After a moment, he turned to look at the buildings of the [Marunouchi](#) business district, the past still burning against the towering skyscrapers.

(How did we ever rise up again from those ruins?) Takaya wondered. How had they gained such strength? How did such a torn and tattered country ever regain its feet? How had it given itself rebirth, risen from its own ashes to rebuild a city such as this?

The stubbornness and resilience of human beings. So many had fallen along the way, but the rest had been able to climb over them and move on.

(How can I become that strong?) Takaya implored the souls still tied to the city.

What formed the strength that allowed the wounded to climb back to their feet after being dealt such blows by a bitter era? What gave them the will to walk on even while carrying the burden of a painful past toward a harsh reality?

What was it born from?

How could he obtain it?

Or was it a power bestowed upon all, something everyone was born with?

"Is it just that...I'm the only one who is too weak?" he whispered haltingly.

"..."

The man, his own face full of pain, gazed with compassion at Takaya as he pressed his hands against his eyes. Takaya's heart, always so lost in its insecurity, might truly be crushed with even the slightest pressure now.

"Let me take you home?...to the sea..." There was such gentleness in the man's voice that Takaya slowly lifted his hands. The man's gaze was far away, as if his mind had already raced there to that shore.

"Let me take you back one more time. To where we can see the water, hear the sound of the waves..."

Takaya's eyes widened. "Take me...home?"

"Yes. Home." The man's eyes were already focused beyond the steel and concrete city upon an illusionary sea.

"Let's go home...to our sea..."

Chapter 8: That Beloved Sea

They drove straight from the city center toward [Odawara City](#) . The late summer sun had begun its downward arc by the time they reached [Castle Ruins Park](#) , and they felt the heat of it against their skin like a tangible force as soon as they got out of the car.

The castle's beautiful white tower shone beneath a cloudless blue sky.

They headed down the gravel path, startling a flock of pigeons into taking wing, and ascended a flight of stone stairs to reach the main gate. Past Tokiwagi Gate, the restored [Odawara Castle](#) soared up before them in all its concrete splendor.

Takaya looked wordlessly up at the castle. The park which had been built around the ruins of the main citadel had also been made part zoo, and the elephants and lions beneath the grand structure presented a rather odd sight.

The man bought entry passes at the ticket counter and began climbing the steps to the entrance without waiting for Takaya. Takaya followed.

The reconstructed tower had been converted into a museum. The man ignored the exhibits. Still carrying his briefcase in his right hand, he climbed the stairs up to the viewing platform on the topmost floor.

The sea spread out before them.

[Odawara City](#) lay below them in an unbroken sweep, encircled by the [Hakone](#) and [Tanzawa Mountain Ranges](#) .

"..."

Takaya had followed the man in silence. He gazed out at the view numbly, face drained of emotion.

"You can see [Mt. Ishigaki](#) from here—the place where Taikou Hideyoshi set up camp," the man said,

his gaze on the gentle slope to the southwest. The stronghold [Taikou Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) constructed there, known as the [One-Night Castle](#) , was where he had gathered his troops for the assault on the Houjou at Odawara. From there he would have had a superb view of the castle and its defenses.

Hideyoshi had embarked on the famous [Siege of Odawara](#) in the spring of the 18th year of Tenshou (1590) with the goal of subjugating [Houjou Ujimasa](#) and his son [Ujinao](#) , who had steadfastly refused fealty to the Toyotomi Clan. Many daimyo

who had already sworn allegiance to Hideyoshi added their troops to the siege, and even [Date Masamune](#) ,

who until this campaign had wavered over opposition or support, had been compelled to seek an audience with the Taikou for the first time and declare his vassalage.

An enormous army 220,000-strong descended upon Odawara, and thus besieged, Ujimasa and his heir surrendered. Hideyoshi demanded the lives of Ujimasa and his younger brother [Ujiteru](#) , and in July of that year they committed ritual suicide.

"Yet Odawara's title of Japan's most impregnable castle is well-earned. Neither [Uesugi Kenshin](#) nor [Takeda Shingen](#) could take it in hard-fought

battles, and it would not have fallen to

the siege but for the overwhelming numbers arrayed against the Houjou. Even then the castle itself never fell to attack. It is truly the greatest castle in the [Kantou](#) ."

"..."

Takaya made no response—and truly, the man no longer seemed to be talking to him. Neither was Takaya looking at the mountain; his gaze was fixed upon [Sagami Bay](#) sparkling in the sunlight.

"This castle is the pride of the Houjou Clan," the man added from behind him. "The place that calls to the souls of all those who bear the Houjou blood...for this is their homeland."

Takaya stood motionless in the wind from the sea. A group of tourists came up the stairs to the platform, but neither Takaya nor the man heard their cheerful voices; they were as isolated from the happy chatter around them as if they stood in another dimension.

The man gave no hint that he had any inkling of the feelings surging through Takaya's chest as he gazed into the distance, so still that he seemed rooted to the spot.

The [Sagami Sea](#) glittered.

The wind, scented with the lake and the last heat of summer, stirred the memories of the distant past hidden within his breast. The gentle, thundering sea. [Miura Peninsula](#) lay to the distant east, [Manaduru](#)

Peninsula to the west, and on clear days even Izu Peninsula was visible. The view held nothing particularly unique; it was, in fact, probably quite common as far as scenery went.

But Takaya felt it.

It was as if this were some primordial image carved onto his soul, piercing his retinas along a familiar path to call up his sealed memories. The voices of people long lost to him surged back from the depths of his soul across the vastness of time like the sea's murmurers.

The man looked at Takaya's back and quietly away, then cast his gaze at the sea again as if his own heart were beating Takaya's agitation.

The City of Odawara , once stronghold of the mighty Later Houjou, a clan which had wielded considerable power in the Kantou during the Sengoku Period for five generations starting with its founder Houjou Souun , was still the center of western Kanagawa Prefecture . During the Edo Period , it had prospered as the 53rd station on the Tokaido . Even now remnants of the past could be seen everywhere within this city seeped in its rich centuries of history.

Odawara Castle , renowned during the Sengoku for its impregnability, had withstood repeated sieges from various warlords such as Takeda Shingen of neighboring Kai and Uesugi Kenshin of Echigo . It was now a famed sightseeing spot, popular with tourists regardless of the season.

Takaya stood silent and still as the expansive sea returned to him the image of his father's face.

His father's voice...

It was too far away, too deep... Takaya could not make out the words.

Yet it filled him with longing, with reverence and awe for the man who towered like a giant in his memories...the man who was not Ougi Takaya's father, though he had not get realized it... Though he did not understand why he felt these things... Though his conscious mind could not acknowledge the connections...

His soul knew...

For the sea, passing straight through his pupils to touch his soul, spoke to him with the voice of Saburou Kagetora 's true father, Houjou Ujiyasu .

The West Shounan Bypass ran parallel to National Route 1 along Odawara City 's coastline. Though it provided the perfect drive, it also blocked the view of the mountain ranges from the beach.

The sun was already sinking below the horizon by the time they left Odawara Castle behind and, after about a fifteen-minute walk, arrived at Miyuki Beach .

It rippled across the waves, infusing the scene with its own beauty.

Takaya closed his eyes and leaned into the sea breeze as it gently ruffled his hair, arms wrapped around himself.

The man remained silent, only gazing quietly at Takaya from a few steps behind him.

They stood thus for uncounted minutes.

As twilight cast its cloak across the beach, the cars along the bypass

began to turn on their lights one by one. It was Takaya's voice which finally cut across the murmur of the waves as he addressed the man standing still and silent behind him.

"So. What is it you want from me?" he asked without turning. Though the man displayed no reaction, the expression changed in his eyes. "What are you guys planning to do with me?"

"..."

"I'm gonna make a wild guess here and say that you're not gonna be nice and just let me go home now that you've got me here. 'Cause I'm dangerous, right? If you turn me loose, it'll be worth your lives."

Still no reaction as Takaya all but declared his awareness of the man's true identity, of the reason he had brought Takaya to Odawara... No. It was not Takaya he had brought...but 'Saburou Kagetora.'

"Will you not come home?" The man finally asked. "Will you not return to us, Saburou?"

"Come home?" Takaya demanded shortly through gritted teeth. "*Home...*"

"This is your homeland. Four hundred years ago, you went to [Echigo](#) to become Kenshin's adopted son, and you died in that strange land

without ever setting your eyes on Odawara again. But you wanted to come

back, didn't you? You always wanted to return to this land of your birth."

Distant memories pressed against Takaya's chest: memories of [Samegao Castle](#) engulfed in flames and his last thoughts in those final moments. In his

despair, in the midst of that unbearable nightmare, it had been his beloved [Sagami Sea](#) that had brought him peace.

For it had been his memories of the sea to which the eyes that had beheld war and defeat and so much death had turned to at the last.

As the blade had pierced his flesh, his last wish had been to return to this land... He had chosen death not to go to the Pure Land, but to return to his true homeland... to this sea he had longed for more than Paradise itself, for it was his only salvation, the only place where he could be free from pain.

(I want to come home...)

That longing had remained buried within his heart for four hundred years. He had returned to Odawara countless times since that first [kanshou](#) , but it had become a poor facsimile of the Odawara from his memories, never again *home*.

He didn't know why that was, only that his homeland would never again exist anywhere but within his heart.

I have...no home to return to.

"...You think you know where my home is?" Takaya muttered, looking down at his feet. "When I've got nothing left?"

"Your home is with us," the man answered quietly. "With our clan. It's

where you wanted to return to. You wanted to come back to your family. Everyone is waiting—waiting for you to come home. Father, too."

Takaya's head jerked up.

"Father is waiting for you to come home. Just as he did four hundred years ago. Even while he lay ill in bed he worried about your wellbeing. When you were sent to the Takeda, and then to Great Uncle and Uesugi in Echigo, he always regretted the necessity. But Saburou..."

"..."

"Father never once thought of you as some sort of chess piece. He always cherished you. In his heart, he felt he needed to apologize to you for what you had to go through. He asked after you even while he lay on the verge of death."

Takaya began to tremble, ever so slightly.

"He...Father...did...?"

"Yes. You must know that he did not differentiate between us in the depth of his love for us. It was part of what made him a great man. He watched us grow and taught us all with the same stern, unwavering affection."

"..."

"Saburou, you are our father's son. You too are a child of the Houjou. Please come back. Toss aside the past crushing your soul...and this

time...come home."

As Takaya turned, the man said to him with unbearable gentleness in the darkness, "Come back to us."

"..."

The plea tore at Takaya's quivering heart, and he didn't know if it was Kagetora's heart or Ougi Takaya's that yearned for what the man was holding out to him. That distinction was meaningless now; what he offered, the warmth of a family that his starved, lonely heart craved, *was* perhaps the homeland of his memories. A homeland filled with unwavering affection and the irreplaceable love of the parents who had given him birth. A homeland he had never again been able to find, no matter how longingly he reached out for it.

The man held out one large hand. Takaya approached, his own right hand reaching for that proffered warmth.

But in that moment—

An image suddenly flashed into the back of his head. A man garbed in the white costume of a warrior-priest gazed at him out of a white world with clear eyes both gentle and stern. And he knew that this was the warrior of righteousness who had galloped across the battlefield clad in the nobility of his ideals, who had been called the incarnation of [Bishamonten](#) : [Uesugi Kenshin](#) .

—*Kagetora!*

The sonorous voice tore apart the space between him and the man, and

Takaya's hand stopped dead.

(Father...!)

Takaya drew back as he returned to himself, hand curled into a fist and hard animosity in his eyes.

"Stop deluding yourself."

"...!"

The man's expression changed. Takaya added, glaring steadily at him,

"I'm not a Houjou anymore. I don't care who this guy Ujiyasu is, he's got nothing to do with me. The only thing I care about is that you're all onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>."

"Saburou, how can you...!"

"I don't know what you are to Kagetora, but it's got nothing to do with me. If you're an onshou of the Houjou, then I've got only one thing to do."

"!"

Takaya glowed white in the darkness. The man flinched back slightly as Takaya began gathering his <<power>>.

"Saburou, what are you doing?!"

"I'm gonna exorcise you! I don't know whose body you've possessed, but you'd better leave right now! 'Cause otherwise, I am gonna perform <<choubuku >> on you!"

"Saburou!"

"My home..." Takaya yelled, hurling a <<nenpa >>, at the man, "...is no longer with you!"

"!"

The sand at the man's feet exploded with a hollow boom, flinging up sand in all directions. Takaya relentlessly flung one <<nenpa >> after another. A tornado of sand formed around the vortex of his power, and the man threw up a <<goshinha >> around himself, crying out desperately even as he gathered his power: "Stop, Saburou! I am not your enemy!"

"You're an onshou , that's all I need to know!"

He gathered power with all his might and focused it in his fist.

"You'd better haul ass to the next world right now!"

Sparks cascaded from the man's <<goshinha >> as Takaya's <<nenpa >> smashed into it. Both of them covered their eyes, waiting for the light to fade before re-engaging.

"Why are you doing this, Saburou?! Are you really going to kill your brother?!"

"Brother...?! All of my brothers died four hundred years ago!"

Takaya concentrated his 'energy' once more, and it flickered like flames around him.

"I'm not going back to the Houjou!"

The man suddenly realized that in a moment Takaya would bring his hands together in Bishamonten 's ritual gesture and envision his shuji .

"Saburou!" The man cried, reflexively countering with his own <<nenpa >>.

"Uwagh!" It hit Takaya squarely, dropping him abruptly to the sand and tumbling him into the surf. The man quickly reached for his briefcase, opening it and taking from it a box containing a round disc-like object.

Panting and dripping, Takaya leveraged himself upright and glared fiercely at the man standing in front of him.

"Is there nothing I can do to convince you to lend us your strength, Saburou?" the man asked, cradling the silk-wrapped object in his arms. Takaya continued to glare at him. In the darkness, a look of pain flashed across the man's face. "Nothing I can do to convince you to come back to us?"

"..."

"Nothing at all...?"

"You're wasting your breath!" Takaya yelled, gathering power into his fists. A beam of reflected light flashed into his eyes. In the man's hands, no longer covered beneath its cloth, was a mirror. A red mirror...

"Gaze upon this, Saburou!"

"Wh...!"

In the instant he met his own eyes in the mirror, light burst from its surface.

!

It struck his forehead like a thunderbolt. The world became a field of stark white, and it felt as if something were trying to tear his head from his body.



His reflection's eyes scorched his retinas...

That was the last thing he saw.

Takaya's soulless body collapsed to the sand and lay absolutely still.

The mirror in Ujiteru's hands began to emit a heated red glow which pulsated like the beat of a heart as if the mirror itself had become a living thing.

(Saburou...)

Ujiteru murmured silently, softly cradling the mirror he had just used to seal his younger brother's soul to his chest. For indeed it was the female 'Tsutsuga Mirror' stolen from Tousei Shrine : Ieyasu's sacred relic.

The 'soul-sealing mirror' with the power to imprison human souls.

"Ujiteru-sama."

Someone had come up to him from behind, walking soundlessly across the sand. Ujiteru carefully rewrapped the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' in its silk swathing before turning to him slowly.

The tall, broad-shouldered youth standing behind Ujiteru had long black hair which fell past his shoulders to his waist. His expressionless features did not quite look Japanese.

This man was Kotarou of the Fuuma .

The Fuuma, the Sagami ninja clan renowned for its agility and feared for its brutality even by other ninja clans, was the Houjou's cloaked dagger. Daimyo had once trembled at their shadowy might. Fuuma Kotarou , its head, held absolute control over the clan. Once upon a time, he had been known as the mightiest ninja of the Sengoku .

"Kotarou?"

"You sealed Saburo-dono within the 'Tsutsuga Mirror' ?"

"No other choice had I. For otherwise Saburo would have enacted <<choubuku >> upon me."

Ujiteru's mouth tightened, and Kotarou studied him for a moment before asking, "Saburou-dono would not consent to submit to us?"

"I blame him not for't. He hath lived as one of the Uesugi for four hundred years. And we could not save him during the [Otate no Ran](#) . His resentment is just," Ujiteru said, hands tightening on the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) .' "

[Houjou Ujiteru](#) was the third son of Ujiyasu, third head of the Houjou Clan. In his previous life, he had been master of [Hachiouji Castle](#) , a branch castle of [Odawara Castle](#) . During the [Otate no Ran](#) , he had advanced as far as [Kouduke](#) with reinforcements for Kagetora, but had been frustrated in the attempt by [Takeda Katsuyori](#) , who had betrayed them to join [Kagekatsu](#) and so had ultimately failed to come to his brother's aid in the war that took his life.

That centuries-old regret devastated him even now as he imagined his brother's faith in him, in a salvation that would never come.

(Dost thou truly hate me then, Saburou...?)

Ujiteru had brought Takaya here in order to persuade him back to the Houjou Clan. It was Kotarou who, in the midst of keeping a close watch on the rebellious Toshima Clan, had first spotted Kagetora at [Nerima Castle](#) and immediately reported that information to Ujiteru.

Ujiteru and the Houjou, too, had heard rumors of Kagetora, and their desire to have that power in their arsenal in the conquest of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >> had intensified their search for him. Ujiteru had always been determined to bring his brother back home one day, but...

"Ujiteru-dono, shall we disposed of this now?" Kotarou asked with pragmatic efficiency as he walked towards Takaya's body lying crumbled

on the beach. "It would be best to do so immediately, for Saburou-dono poses a great danger to us if he will not agree to aid us. We cannot risk him returning to his body. Sealing him here was the best course. If this shell is no longer needed..."

"..."

Ujiteru wavered for a moment. Then he lifted his head and commanded firmly, "Bring the body to the car."

"Ujiteru-dono...?" Kotarou's questioning expression asked the 'why?' But Ujiteru refused to retract his command.

"I said bring it."

"Aye, my lord," Kotarou answered quietly, though not bothering to hide his doubt. He strode across the sand and lightly picked up Takaya's body.

"Kotarou. How doth my brother? Fares he well?"

"Preparations proceed smoothly for Ujimasa-dono at [Nikkou](#) . Two souls have been chosen for the offering at [Futarasan Shrine](#) , both bound without incident into the sacred trees."

"Then only the master tree remains?"

Ujiteru glared fiercely into the empty sky.

"Is something amiss?"

"Let *them* bring the final offering. For he and he alone is fit for the master tree. Let them bring him, and the preparations at [Nikkou](#) will be complete

within the day."

"*Them?*"

Ujiteru's expression had turned wary. "It seems my brother places much trust in them, but I have not his confidence. Is it mete that we should leave so much up to them...?"

Kotarou gave him a quick sidelong glance.

"Ujiteru-dono."

"I can but leave Nikkou to my brother. My duty lies at [Hakone](#) . Come, let us away to the 'Yatate Cedar' at [Hakone Shrine](#) to make our offering—"

He looked down at the palely glowing mirror he cradled with such care. The '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ,'

suborned by the Houjou into a soul-hunting tool, now held his brother's soul in its womb. Ujiteru's brows creased for a moment before he turned to Kotarou.

"Bring the car. Let us return to Hakone."

"Yes, my lord." Kotarou's doubt-filled eyes followed Ujiteru's receding figure as he adjusted his grip on Takaya's hollowed body.

Waves rippled endlessly to [Sagami Bay](#) 's dark shore. In the sky, a red star twinkled.

Yuzuru and company had returned to [Matsumoto](#) late last night, and for them that day was filled with a tumult quite beyond that of the Opening Day Ceremony.

Yuzuru was so agitated after hearing from Takaya's sister that morning that Takaya had not come home that he had left school several times and even skipped his afternoon club activities to check at Takaya's house with Chiaki.

"I told you! This is why we shouldn't have left him go off by himself!"

Yuzuru flared. "As if there was any chance he'd get home before us!"

The obstinate Chiaki, who had borne Yuzuru's censure since that morning, was looking decidedly sour. For he was indeed the one who had ignored Yuzuru's pleas to go looking for Takaya and dragged him back home to [Matsumoto](#) virtually by the scruff of his neck.

"All right, all right! Shut up about it already, Narita!"

"You don't know what he'll do when he's in that kind of mood! If anything happens to him, it'll be your fault!"

"Geez, give it a rest already! This *is* that idiot we're talking about—he's probably having the time of his life in [Kabuki Town](#) or something!"

Yuzuru rounded on him fiercely, and Chiaki twitched back. "At least be a little contrite about it, since it was your fault!" he glowered.

"Humph! It's 'cause you spoiled him that Kage-tora turned into such a pussy!"

Yuzuru's eyebrows jumped up. "I haven't spoiled him! It's because he's so

reckless that I worry about him!"

"Hah, is that right." Chiaki's tone only stoked Yuzuru's anger.

"And what about you? You're all over Takaya all the time—you never let up on him! Do you really hate him that much? Just what is it about him that rubs you the wrong way?"

"What is it about him? Everything, obviously!" Chiaki grumbled. "I can't stand how vapid he is, like he's another stupid punk just like all the other stupid punks around here."

"Don't you dare talk about him like that!"

"You don't understand a damned thing!" Chiaki glared sharply back at Yuzuru. "The true Kageatora isn't this half-hearted brat. He was better than this—a more complete and perfect being—someone who could make you quake in your boots! That's why he was worth competing with."

"...? Chiaki?"

"He always disgusted me. So he was the noble son of the great [Houjou Ujiyasu](#) ,

so what? Did that give him the right to lord it over everybody? He was a fucking moron to think he could take over as clan head just because he came from the mighty Houjou. After I first died, I was furious to have to serve under him, even if it was Kenshin himself who asked. I only agreed 'cause I never thought I'd be around this long." Chiaki snorted in annoyance. "I wasn't gonna come out second-best to

somebody

like him! I've got my pride as a hereditary vassal of the Uesugi Clan too, you know. And besides, look at how the Houjou ended up."

"So that's why you always saw him as your rival? You're talking about stuff that happened four hundred years ago. Don't you think it's kinda dumb to still be all hung up about who's a Houjou and who's an Uesugi?"

"Are you trying to piss me off?" Chiaki flared.

"Well, it's true! You're the one who's still so wrapped up in the [Sengoku Era](#) that you can't let anything go."

"..."

Chiaki closed his mouth, stumped by Yuzuru's shrewd observations. It was certainly true that the Houjou-Uesugi rivalry had only motivated him at the beginning. His desire to compete against Kagetora had sprung from a deep knowledge of Kagetora's character and true abilities as a [Yasha-shuu](#) of the [Uesugi Army](#).

For his part, Kagetora had never been one to take him lightly. At times even Nagahide had been forced to acknowledge that here was indeed the

son of [Houjou Ujiyasu](#), whose name had been no less venerated than that of [Shingen](#) and [Kenshin](#), the other great heroes of the [Kantou](#).

Resistance had transformed into rivalry. To see Kagetora's greatness was to long for the chance to strive against him. No one without that greatness was worthy of the title of his rival, for pitting himself against a weaker opponent was meaningless. It had to be someone

whose

true strength he could inwardly admire, whose existence could be his pride.

In a person's life, how often might one find someone one might truly give the title of 'rival?' Yet Nagahide had Kagetora. Someone against whom there was no need to hold back any of his true strength. Was that not reason enough to live?

(That's why I will never forgive Kagetora for what he has become.)

And therein lay Chiaki's resentment.

Not that he really had the leisure to explain all of that to Yuzuru. To Yuzuru, only 'Ougi Takaya' existed.

"Kagetora, Kagetora—that's all you see! You just want to rant at him.

Fine, just go home already! I'll go look for him by myself," Yuzuru snapped, and began walking rapidly away from Takaya's building.

"Wh...! Hey, where do you think you're going?!"

"I'm going back to Tokyo! I'm going back to look for Takaya!"

"You're what?! Hey! Narita!"

Ignoring him, Yuzuru headed up the hill road toward the station. A

black Crown came up from behind and pulled to a sudden stop in front of him, cutting him off. What the...he stopped. The passenger-side door opened, and an unfamiliar youth around his own age stepped out.

What's going on? Yuzuru wondered as the delicate yet intelligent-looking, dark-eyed youth came toward him.

"Are you Narita Yuzuru-san...?"

"Huh? Uh, yes. I am..." Yuzuru responded bewilderedly as a wary Chiaki stepped in front of him protectively.

"Who the hell are you?" he growled—right before the paralysis hit him.

"Ugh...!"

"Chiaki?"

The young man's hand came chopping down against Yuzuru's neck.

"!"

Yuzuru dropped soundlessly to the ground. Chiaki cried out sharply, but the binding held him fast. The youth lifted Yuzuru from the asphalt.

"Damn...you...!"

"I need Narita-dono to accompany me."

The dark-eyed young man said, lifting Yuzuru up to the man who had stepped out of the driver's side. Chiaki struggled desperately against his bounds, but they refused to yield. What was this power?!

"Who...are...you?!"

"You are one of the Uesugi, yes?" The youth guessed astutely. "I am taking Narita-dono. We have need of the power he displayed in [Sendai](#)."

"Where the hell did you come from...?!"

The youth returned Chiaki's gaze quietly, and a gasp shivered across his shoulders. For a moment he thought a white mist had blurred across his vision before he realized his opponent had called a thick fog to conceal his retreat.

(What the hell...?!)

"Please tell Naoe-[uji](#) —" the young man's disembodied voice drifted to him out of the fog. "I will not fail to take revenge for my mother's death in [Yamagata](#) ."

"! You...you're...!"

[Date Kojiro](#) , Masamune's younger brother, who had disappeared after the battle against [Mogami](#) in Sendai—the same battle in which Naoe had <<exorcised>> his mother [Hoshunin](#) . But why would he be *here*...?!

"You think I'm just gonna let you leave, you little punk?"

Chiaki mustered his <<power>> and sliced through the paralysis, then immediately went on the offensive with a blast of <<[nenpa](#) >>.

"!"

It connected. His opponent had not been quick enough to dodge the unexpected counterattack. The fog cleared. So it was just an illusion after all—mere trickery. Chiaki focused his power between his brows.

"You think something like this can stop me?"

That was when his opponent made his move. From out of nowhere, several silhouettes advanced on Chiaki, assaulting him with a hail of energy shaped by will into pebble-hard projectiles.

"Guh...!"

He wove a <<goshinha >>

around himself. Plasmatic shards scattered violently in all directions as a merciless coordinated attack pinned him in place. By the time he realized that he had been surrounded, it was too late. Kojirou and his servant were already speeding away with the unconscious Yuzuru. Chiaki, still holding his <<goshinha >> against the relentless attack, had nothing left to spare.

"Enough!"

Furious, Chiaki threw everything into an explosion of <<power>>.

Boom!

Light erupted violently from Chiaki's body to consume the attack before overwhelming it entirely with a thunderous roar.

"Bastards...!"

As he set out to give chase, he felt something grab his foot.

"What the!"

He wrenched around to see that a white hand had emerged from the asphalt to clutch at his foot. As he struggled to pull free, the blood-covered decapitated head of a woman appeared behind him.

"You're not getting away from me," it told him, laughing eerily out of its crushed and ruined face. Its black hair abruptly elongated and wrapped itself around Chiaki's body.

"Guh...!"

The hair coiled around him with the tensile strength of steel and began to squeeze the life out of him. Strands wrapped around his neck and tightened. He couldn't breathe!

"Gaa....agh..."

The woman's severed head sneered mockingly at the anguish twisting Chiaki's face. He choked, sinking to his knees as the strength drained out of him.

(...You...bitch...!)

Writhing and gasping, Chiaki reached into his pocket and drew out a small [kokeshi](#) doll-like object.

It was a [koppashin](#) : the representation of a divine being carved from sacred wood. This, the [Shoumen Kongou](#) , Chiaki carried for protection. Chiaki chanted the [shingon](#) in a nearly soundless wheeze and drew the accompanying seed syllable in the air.

" ([Un](#))!"

A deep rumble shook the ground as the wrathful blue-skinned god manifested onto the earthly plane. It opened its mouth wide and spat out a ball of pure white light.

!

For a moment the world turned incandescent white. There was a short scream, and the hair disappeared, releasing Chiaki abruptly. He panted for a moment before looking up.

"Hah. Good thing I had that on me..." he muttered to himself as he glared into the distance after the car that had abducted Yuzuru.

(Narita—...!)

Chapter 9: The Beast Within the Mirror

"Takaya-san

is missing?!" Naoe roared into the public telephone in the lobby of the inn. "What do you mean you don't know where he is, Haruie? What happened to him?!"

It was that night. He had been staying since the previous night at Maiko's inn on the banks of [Lake Chuuzenji](#) .

Ayako, now at home in [Yokohama](#) , sounded like she was having a rough time of it. Naoe had called her to ask for help with the search for the '[Tsutsuga Mirror](#) ,' only to be hit with the news of the events at [Nerima Castle](#) culminating with Takaya's angry departure, capped by the fact that he had not yet returned to [Matsumoto](#) .

"How could you let him go off by himself? And you just left him there? Were you out of your minds?! I can't believe you went home without him!" Naoe raged, so shocked that he was unaware of the violence in his own raised voice.

"You don't have to be that mad at me about it! If you want to blame anyone, you should blame yourself!" Ayako finally retorted as Naoe's blindness to his own short-comings and the torrent of blame finally drove her to the snapping point. "Why weren't you there? It's *your* duty to be at Kagetora's side!"

Naoe's eyes widened as the words slammed into him.

"I don't know what happened, but you're supposed to be with him no

matter what! What the hell are you doing in Nikkou when he's falling apart? You're the one who should be protecting him, so stop taking my head off about it!"

"..."

Naoe's brows creased silently at Ayako's outburst. Ayako was far more sympathetic to Naoe's feelings than Chiaki and had always been concerned for him. Impatient though she was with his agonizing, she had always pushed back the things she wanted to say precisely because she understood it.

But Naoe's incriminations had suddenly struck her as so terribly and mind-bogglingly self-centered that she could no longer take them lying down.

"At least you have Kagetora! No matter what, at least the person most precious to you is here with you! You're such a gutless coward! Whatever happens, you want to be with him until the end, don't you?!"

"Haruie..."

"Just stop all your stupid, meaninglessly obsessing! You love Kagetora, don't you?! Love him like you'll never love anyone else? So stop telling yourself that he can't love you back! You've got a chance, at least! So don't you dare leave him again! Just go and be with him every minute, every second!" Ayako yelled at the top of her lungs before breaking off with what sounded like a sob.

"Why are you crying? Haruie..."

"I...I don't know! Because you're so pathetically spineless that it makes me miserable! I've been waiting for two hundred years! And even if I were to see him again, I don't even know for sure that I'll recognize him! You've got so much, and you don't even realize it! You don't know how lucky you are!"

"..."

Ayako was thinking of her own lover from two hundred years ago.

Bewildered by her weeping, Naoe soothed, "It's all right. I understand."

"No, you don't understand! You don't understand anything at all! At least you have the person you love here with you! That's happiness enough! You have no idea!" she sobbed, half hysterical.

To anyone else it might have sounded like they were having a lovers' quarrel, Naoe thought with a wry smile. "It's all right...I'm sorry to have worried you."

"If you really mean that, then go find Kagetora. No matter what he says, Kagetora is waiting for you—waiting for you to go to him. Even back then, I know he must have... If he didn't need you, then things with Minako wouldn't have turned out the way they did..."

The smile abruptly vanished from Naoe's face as it darkened. His eyes fell

"If only that were true."

"Don't leave him. Don't ever leave him again. For your own sake."

(My sake...?) Naoe murmured soundlessly in self-mocking. That was absurd. Being with him led to nothing but pain. To be unable to leave the one who was his Absolute...the one who was dictator to him alone...was agony.

(Am I not going to make an end of it?) he muttered to himself as if to convince himself.

He would put an end to this life lived across four hundred years. This war would wipe everything clean. He fought it not for tomorrow, but to end it all.

He had decided that the destruction of the <<Yami-Sengoku >> would be his own ending. It would be the day he parted from Kage-tora, the day 'Naoe Nobutsuna '

ceased to exist. He would finally escape the agony of loving but a single person. For if he could not escape from him, then there was nothing left but to abandon himself.

(The day I part from everything...)

Until the <<Yami-Sengoku >>

was destroyed... He would allow himself to live on. He had borne the pain for this long; how hard could it be to carry it for a little while longer? He would wipe his past clean, purge it of his feelings, of Minako, of his sins toward Kage-tora, of everything...

From his insensate dictator —

(I will release myself...)

"Naoe? Naoe, what's wrong?"

Ayako's voice, suddenly filled with worry, brought him back to himself. A cold smile curved the corners of Naoe's lips.

"Nothing..."

Then, telling Ayako that he would contact Takaya's family, they concluded the rest of their business and ended the call. Ayako remained blissfully unaware of the conclusion he had drawn; his mask was not so easily pierced by anyone.

Replacing the receiver in its cradle, Naoe turned to find that Maiko had come up behind him unawares.

"Asaoka-san..."

"You were...speaking to a woman just now, weren't you?"

Naoe regarded her a little warily. For just a moment, something ugly seemed to have twisted her sweet face beyond recognition. But Maiko had realized it too, and an instant later was herself once more.

"Dinner is ready. I came to let you know, but you weren't in your room... Should you be moving about?"

"The pain is manageable. I seem to be all right now."

Maiko looked apologetic. The wound from the tsutsuga had turned out to be deeper and more serious than they'd thought, and even though he had received treatment for it at the hospital, it had generated a fever which had prevented Naoe from returning home. As a result, he had spent

the night at the inn owned by Maiko's family. When the fever continued unabated the next day, [Katakura Kojuurou](#) had gone out to investigate in his place and returned with a detailed report of his findings.

The situation was worsening by the day. A second face had been discovered that morning in the leftmost of the sacred trees at [Futarasan Shrine](#) . It looked almost exactly like Shinya's and belonged to the man who had fallen into [Kegon Falls](#) yesterday: another of the tsutsuga's victims.

As if that were not bad enough, a great number of other faces were appearing in cedar trees all across Mt. Nikkou, albeit with less life-like distinctness.

Upon learning the news from Kousaka, Kojuurou had visited [Futarasan Shrine](#) a second time and probed deeper into the background of the man who had fallen victim to the tsutsuga at [Kegon Falls](#) .

Naoe had intended to join him in the investigation, but at Maiko and Kojuurou's insistence had been forced to remain behind to recuperate at the inn.

"I cannot impose on you any longer—I will set out tomorrow morning. There is still the matter of your brother, and I cannot sleep soundly while it remains unresolved."

"Please don't push yourself so hard!" Maiko pleaded. "You were wounded so badly for my...for my brother's sake, and I really don't know what I can do to make it up to you. If you're hurt even more and the damage becomes irreversible, I don't know what I—"

"It is not so serious as you make it sound."

"No!" Maiko exclaimed—and hesitated. Then she looked up at Naoe with resolve.

"Tachibana-san, if anything should happen to you, I...! I..."

"..."

The solemnity of her gaze conveyed her feelings quite clearly to Naoe.

"Asaoka-san..."

She was without question an attractive woman. To be the recipient of such a look from a woman as beautiful as she would doubtlessly have stirred many a man's heart, prior interest or no, Naoe thought, smiling a little. And in truth, he was no different. If he knew her feelings to be true, he would take her into his arms this instant... that is—

(If he had not already taken up residence inside my heart...)

Maiko was unaware of the true nature of that faint smile. All she knew was that she wanted to touch the secret fire blazing beneath his cool exterior—a fire she had not yet glimpsed, but which something like woman's intuition insisted must exist.

"...Thank you," he answered, smiling at her. And though Maiko would have willingly let herself be scorched by the touch of his true self, she knew that countless others had seen this gentle smile, that he would show this same kindness to anyone. He would wear it for faceless multitudes.

It did not belong to anyone, least of all her.

"...I know." Maiko looked down, hiding her face from him, struggling to hold back the surge of tears. "I know, but I..."

"..."

Though there was bewilderment in Naoe's expression as he looked down at

Maiko, his tone was gentle. "It seems I am destined to make you cry."

I wouldn't dispute that, Maiko thought as she sobbed. And perhaps she might even have hoped that her tears would soften his heart towards her, even a little.

Naoe was fully aware of Maiko as a 'woman,' but he also knew how genuine her feelings for him were, and he had no wish to use her simply as the means to lessen his pain for an hour.

Though Maiko might have been willing to offer herself to him even knowing he would see her as nothing more than a moment's respite, Naoe

managed to dredge up a more fatherly tenderness to resist the temptation to deal her such a wound.

"She must be an amazing person..." Maiko murmured haltingly. "That you would cherish her so... What is she like?" Wiping at her tears, Maiko finally smiled.

Naoe returned her smile. "If you were to meet, I think you would understand without my needing to explain," Naoe replied, and then looked down, a loneliness creeping into his expression that roused Maiko's protective instincts.

"Ah. It must be someone strong-willed and resolute, overbearing and cold, yet with a deep vulnerability and beauty that draws you in and refuses to let go.

"..."

"And...your love is unrequited, isn't it?"

Naoe gave her a startled look. A woman's intuition was truly a force to be reckoned with. It was enough to make him suspect that Shinya's precognitive abilities were not the only supernatural talents in the family.

Kagetora's razor-edged gaze flashed across the back of his mind.

"Subtle and cunning," he murmured, smiling again. "Too devious to defy."

Maiko gave him a motherly look. "Shall I bring your dinner to your room?" She was back to her normal self. "There was a call from Katakura-san earlier. He is at [Nikkou Station](#) and should be back shortly.

Do you want to eat now?"

"No, I'll wait. It's a bit lonely, isn't it, to dine by yourself?"

Maiko wanted to join them, but thinking that they might wish to talk privately about their work, withheld the request. "I need to help with the serving," she said instead, and left for the kitchen. "See you in a bit."

Looking after her, Naoe took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. He lifted one to his lips and lit it, then leaned back against the wall and smiled again.

(Unrequited love, huh?)

If the bindings of obedience and loyalty was 'love,' then he supposed one could call it that. But it was not unrequited, for it was a 'love' that did not seek reciprocation.

(It is nothing but a twisted desire for possession.)

He wanted to grasp, to hold—not to be loved in return. It was merely the desire to declare ownership, to monopolize. Having deluded himself into thinking that the chains of absolute obedience was 'love,' he now begged to be bound and eagerly awaited the lash and the bait. And perhaps this was the source of his desire for the submission of the one who held absolute power over him, the lust for conquest and the need to rule over his master in return.

What part of that could be called love?

It was not how one loved another person. To be loved was not something he had a right to hope for. He doubted its very existence.

(It is nothing more than a perversion of power against power.)

He no longer knew what love was. It might even be that because he thought what he felt for Kagetora might be love, he had forbidden himself from doing anything to make Kagetora his.

Even if by the smallest chance it could be love, it could never bring them together except in body.

These desires were the product of a twisted mind.

No more than delusion, illusion, counterfeit reality.

(*That* is the reality...)

He extinguished the cigarette and headed up the stairs to his room. The old western-style inn had a beautiful red-carpeted staircase of wood that connected the lobby to the second floor.

At the top hung an old mirror. Naoe gave his revoltingly servile reflection a mocking glance. At that moment—

Feeling as if something were calling out to him, he lifted his eyes to the mirror again to see a silhouette suddenly appear behind him.

(Wh...?) He spun...and saw no one. He jerked back to the mirror.

And gasped.

(It can't be...!)

He couldn't quite believe his own eyes. For there, standing behind him in the mirror, was Takaya. He clutched at it reflexively.

"Takaya-san!"

He strained toward Takaya before turning again to search the empty landing. He neither saw nor sensed anyone. Naoe's stunned gaze turned again to the mirror. It was not an illusion. Takaya was there—there inside the mirror.

"Takaya-san! How...?!"

I see my brother reflected within the mirror...!

He recalled Maiko's words. Was this what she had meant? But why? Why was Takaya...?!

"Kagetora-sama!" Naoe shouted at the image of his lord within the mirror. "What happened? Why are you in there?"

Takaya did not respond, only stared fixedly at him. He reached out, but could only touch his own reflection's hand; he could not reach Takaya.

"What happened?! Kagetora-sama!"

He drove his fist with all his might into the mirror. It cracked, a long fissure splintering its surface directly over Takaya's heart. He jerked back. And vivid images suddenly filled his vision.

(...!)

There were no accompanying words, only scenes flashing from Takaya's mind into his. Dumbfounded, Naoe pressed a hand against his mouth.

(Kagetora-sama...)

He vision filled with the image of Takaya with blood flowing out of torn skin, and his breath stopped. He stood frozen in place, staring at Takaya within the mirror.

(It can't be...)

The blood drained out of his face and all capacity for speech was lost to him as he stood there helplessly, face to face with his entrapped lord.

TO BE CONTINUED